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Africanist influences in 19th century American literature : a discussion of critical approaches

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AFRICANIST INFLUENCES IN 19TH CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE:

A DISCUSSION OF CRITICAL APPROACHES

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Ingrid Helen Andersson

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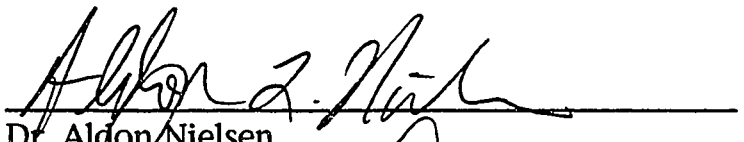

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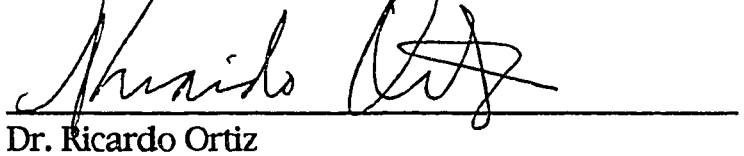

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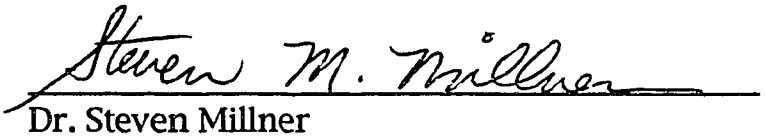

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ABSTRACT

AFRICANIST INFLUENCES IN 19TH CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE:
A DISCUSSION OF CRITICAL APPROACHES

by Ingrid Helen Andersson

This thesis traces the presence of an Africanist influence in three 19th century writers: Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Close readings of works by these authors and of critical studies devoted to their texts constitute the basis of an extended discussion on theoretical and critical approaches to an Africanist influence in American literature.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Works such as Harry Levin's *The Power of Blackness* and Sacvan Bercovitch's *The American Jeremiad* respectively outline American literature's groundings in Gothic Romance and Puritanism. Along with other critical inquiries, these works have laid the foundations for a genealogical study of blackness in American literature. Yet, despite the connections between a Puritan focus on blackness and an economic system reliant on slavery, few critics have built on this critical foundation to inquire into the connection between an aesthetic of blackness in American literature influenced by the historical presence of African Americans in this country and the effect this connection has had on the construction and nature of whiteness in American literature.

American literature itself provides us with compelling evidence that Africans who were brought to this country became material for the literary imagination almost immediately, inhabiting by association as well as explicitly the forms already established by the aesthetic of Puritan iconography and Gothic romance. Occupying these forms, Africanism soon became a decisive tool in defining the white experience. In the Puritan jeremiad sermons, images of blackness paradoxically functioned, as Bercovitch points out, to assure the colonists of their divine errand, of their lot as a chosen people, and of their spiritual maturation through trial. However, a different dynamic emerges around the blackness in American literature that either explicitly refers to or carries connotations of African Americans and slaves. When images or references to blacks come to occupy the sites of supernatural darkness in the American aesthetic, they bring with

them a whole set of tensions that the Puritan socialization process could not as easily incorporate.

The fact that these references to blacks often came to occupy sites in the aesthetic where in Gothic Romances or Puritan sermons we would have encountered religious or supernatural images of blackness introduces a new dimension to the transcendental and metaphysical overtones in American literature. The result of this appropriation is a blackness in American literature that, in effect, is refused and refuses the socialization, subsumption, and diffusion into the fold of the burgeoning middle-class social structure.

Via romance and religion, the supernatural literary blackness became an easily incorporated, integral part of the American myth. This same process of incorporation, however, became problematic in the case of a blackness that referred to blacks and slaves, since blacks were in effect denied integration simply by virtue of their blackness. The tension that emerges, then, in much of American literature originates in the appropriation of African Americans by a literary aesthetic of blackness whose role it was to present readers with a metaphysical principle of identity, a blackness that could become fully integrated *only as long* as it remained metaphysical, allegorical, and internal (and even then it sometimes threatens to take control of the narrative). When this aesthetic of blackness alluded to or assumed the forms of black people, the dilemma created threatened to jeopardize the literature as well as the social structure.

The Africanist presence in American literature had to be subsumed under a purely metaphysical status, reducing blacks, and all that pertained to them to mythic objects, since full recognition of their status as living,

breathing human selves would render the metaphysic defunct. Yet, to preserve the mythic status of blacks, their mythic "otherness," in order to maintain this central metaphysical principle of identity proved impossible since the *physical* presence of blacks and the entire system of slavery (the underpinning of which was the American myth), indeed, was America in the flesh. An irreconcilable paradox, America had become an economy and society necessarily reliant on the simultaneous physical and mythical status of blacks.

The resulting tension of this paradox is still with us today, in the literature and in society. Socially, we're still paying a high price for the insistence on myth, and, interestingly, a corresponding price is perhaps being paid in studies of American literature. What much of American literature is marked with, as a result of the unsuccessful attempt at subsuming the Africanist influence under a purely metaphysical ontology and telos, is an almost unbearable aesthetic tension that acts on and forces the underlying Puritan aesthetic to an agonizing pitch. Through this aesthetic tension, the white identity emerges—as fragile, dark, and tortured as any Greek tragic character we know. But this in itself is not negative. The tragedy of American literature resides, rather, in the fact that the aesthetic that was meant to guide and to instruct has instead enslaved its subjects. Obscuring its own construction, the aesthetic of blackness developed into a metaphysic that has informed American literature as well as its criticism, and in doing so appears to have caught us in a trap: the metaphysic in American literature has become a veil whose transparency obscures as it makes possible its own existence.

In much of American literature, the presence of African Americans has been influential in shaping white identity. The identifiable presence in American literature of an aesthetic tension anchored in this binary opposition and its relationship to the construction of whiteness will inevitably have to be brought to bear on the various approaches we might take in our studies. Thus, an analysis of critical and theoretical approaches must necessarily accompany any discussion of whiteness in American literature.

Criticism and theory are operative parts of any cultural regeneration, be it in literature, mass media, politics, or science. How these theories and critical approaches legitimize a particular expression reflects on that expression's own regenerative power. Good critics are self-aware. They treat of the implications of their work as well as the contextual marks on their work–the residue it leaves in its wake, and the critical "residue" it uses as a basis for critique. Literary theory and criticism can, therefore, help us discover, understand, and finally perhaps even suspend (if only momentarily) the cultural and historical boundaries that establish the parameters of our imagination and methodology.

Investigating the American literary imagination, then, does not involve sorting out what is attractive or desirable from what is reprehensible or objectionable to our politically and aesthetically discriminating tastes today. Nor does it involve encouraging an interest in any one writer, literary movement, aesthetic influence, critical or theoretical approach. Rather it involves exploring what has gone into the formation of whiteness in the American literary imagination, in literary criticism, and in the theoretical developments that have attempted to explain the literature it springs from, so that we, in turn, may see more clearly what went into our making as

readers and critics of American literature. Understanding the extent of this interrelationship between literature, criticism, and theory, we need to move the discussion safely beyond the constantly looming metaphysical, transcendental, backsliding approach to American literature (which, for all intents and purposes, tends still to be the predominant threat to literary criticism in America today), if we are to fully understand the effects and constructs of whiteness in American literature.

A critical investigation of this sort will implicitly call for, or call attention to, both new and recycled approaches to literary study. In doing so, a certain vigilance is required if we are, to borrow Foucault's words, " to separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think" (*Foucault* 46). But even with this vigilance, problems emerge. If we are to use an investigative approach to American literature as a means of discovering (uncovering) the genealogy and telos of whiteness in the American literary imagination and, consequently, to set the scene for a new critical and, thus, imaginary telos, the particular investigative approach we choose will undoubtedly add its own distortive value. This issue becomes particularly important when we consider that any critical and theoretical investigation and analysis of whiteness in American literature will, inescapably, reflect and reflect on issues of race and institutional power structures. We must ask then: whose eyes ? Whose critical voice? Whose theory? It seems imperative that we recognize the full significance and impact of criticism as appropriation, and that, if we want to earn our names as literary scholars, we simply can no longer afford to continue working in appropriating, separatist fashions. We must work closely with a range of

critical and theoretical approaches, acknowledging the historical weight of our voices. If we are concerned with understanding the significance of an Africanist presence in American literature, we need both Anglo and African American theory. Since any investigation distorts what it investigates, we must acknowledge and assume responsibility for the "new" literature we create.

In her 1992 book, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison draws our attention to ways in which an African presence in this country has influenced the imaginations of many of America's writers. Sometimes this blackness, or what Morrison refers to as Africanism (a term she borrows from Christopher Miller), takes the explicit shape of African American characters. Flannery O'Connor's short story "The Artificial Nigger" makes explicit use of Africanist images to express and shape the framework for the existential and interpersonal questions of identity in two white male characters. At other times this Africanism is more subtle and implicit food for the literary imagination, such as in Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, where the Africanist influence manifests in such forms as Ethiopian hieroglyphics discovered in Antarctica and black natives inhabiting a strange nation covered with ice. Whether explicit or implicit, Africanist images in the American literary imagination are many and often significant to the aesthetic structure they inhabit. In many instances they function to unite, classify, and define the white American experience, such as in O'Connor's "The Artificial Nigger." In other contexts, such as in Hawthorne's novels and tales, they fill the psychological mood with a connotative tension that invests the works with a sense of danger and impending chaos.

But, the presence of Africanist influences in American literature does more than set the scene for explorations of the meaning of whiteness, the American identity, and existential quandaries; it also contributes to and legitimizes the basis of an American social order. In *The American Jeremiad,* Bercovitch writes that the Puritan Jeremiad quickly expanded beyond its religious and immediate communal function to gain a larger, subtler, and decisively broader function in the socialization process of the American revolutionary impetus, as well as in the establishment of middle-class values, whose consequential effect it was to diffuse the subversive threat of such radicalism. Unlike the European Jeremiads, which were laments over the ways of the world and people's sinful natures, the American Jeremiad employed images of darkness and doom as signs that the Puritans were the chosen people, and that the predestined salvation awaited them if they didn't swerve from their preordained destiny. It was a paradoxical stance: Americans were the chosen people, and their sins would not change that status; yet, the duty was to perfection and realization of the dream of the city on the hill. The Jeremiad functioned, therefore, to remind Americans of the sacred and secular necessity of adhering to the norms of Puritan society for the sake of both spiritual and economic gain.

It is important to recognize that secular and sacred were fused in the Jeremiad. The economic gains of the colonies were at the same time seen as spiritual gains fulfilling in their accumulation the promise of the New Jerusalem. Unlike European Protestant nations, New England alone had "the Blessings both of the upper and nether Springs, the blessings of Time and Eternity" (Davenport qtd. in Bercovitch 47).

This concept of a fusion between spiritual and economical gain is particularly interesting in respect to the slave trade. Houston A. Baker points out in his *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* that, in fact, the slaves were economic as well as spiritual cargo. According to Puritan literary history, we must see the slaves as filling a crucial function in the profitable plantation economy in America: profits that were promised the American people and which were inextricably linked to their spiritual errand. The Africans were, in fact, seen as "spiritual cargo delivered to God" (*Blues* 33).

The pervasiveness and irony of an economy and religious ideology based on enslavement finds its manifestation in slave narratives such a *The Life of Olaudah Equiano*, in which Equiano buys his own freedom by means of serving on a vessel shipping slaves from the Caribbean to North America. On his travels between the Caribbean islands, he engages in purchasing and selling gin and glass tumblers, the profits of which finally earn him his freedom:

> When we came to Montserrat, I sold the gin for eight bits, and the tumblers for two, so that my capital now amounted to a dollar, well husbanded and acquired in space of a month or six weeks, when I blessed the Lord that I was so rich (Equiano 84).

Along with the economical system, the masters' religion was also soon adopted by the enslaved Africans. Not only did the Christian message pertain to their lot, bringing promise of deliverance to a suppressed people, but, more significantly (and cast in the trappings of a Puritan "sacred" economy), it also contained the paradoxical correlative of economic gain as a promise of deliverance. "[The slave] realizes, in effect, that only the acquisition of property will enable him to alter his designated status as property . . . the document [of manumission] signals the ironic transformation

of property by property into humanity" (*Blues* 35-6). But Baker also points out that this was a transaction taking place in the West Indies. The transition from property to humanity was not quite as smooth in the plantation economy of the Southern States.

Though acquisition of property may have bought some few slaves their freedom from Southern plantation masters, it did not establish them as Americans, as part of the chosen. Instead, the Africans remained locked into the white imagination in the manichean role of the "other," and as such they functioned in the literature as the antithesis and delineators of whiteness. Taking the places of allegorical and supernatural images such as the black veil of Hawthorne's Mr. Hooper or the "athletic and coal-begrimed figure" of Ethan Brand on his "strange errand" into the wide unknown world, blacks became characters embodying the Puritan preoccupation with darkness. Poe's character encounters black savages and Ethiopian hieroglyphics in the midst of white masses of ice in Antarctica. O'Connor's Mr. Head and Nelson come to recognize their own identity and the balance in their own relationship by means of an encounter with the plaster figure of a Negro. Thus, much of Africanist influence in white literature in America appears to be a direct reflection of white existential struggles.

But, the representations and the allusions to black characters are not mere figures to take the places of supernatural images. The use of Africanist images evokes also, necessarily, an historical legacy tainted by a mixture of the Puritan psychology, unresolved guilt, existential crises, the myth of the exotic and strange, as well as a deep desire for innocence. Thus, since Africanist characters and images were invested with these characteristics, as such they were attributed the power of defining the characteristics of

whiteness in American literature. The precarious balancing act of power and control over the narrative begins then in this binary structure. The extent to which white literary identity relied on caricatures of blacks is a good measure of the precarious nature of this binary construct. Again O'Connor's "The Artificial Nigger" (O'Connor is, of course, a master of satire) is a superb example of this phenomenon. When one of her characters makes the observation upon encountering the grotesque plaster figure that "they ain't got enough real ones here. They got to have an artificial one," the revelation of this literary character seems to call out for a critical exploration of the effects such artificial representations of African Americans have had on the formation of the white literary psyche.

Africanism, then, as Christopher Miller uses the term, is a systematic objectification of anything or anyone pertaining to the African continent. A more familiar concept, perhaps, is Orientalism—the West's objectification of the Orient, which took its shape in a complex and enduring structure of political, anthropological, scientific, sociological, and humanistic study and appropriation of the Orient. Colonialism and imperialism required complete objectification of the peoples and nations colonized or enslaved. Such a process involved investing everything Oriental or African with the characteristics of "the other."

This tendency to define the self through the other is not unique to American writers or Americans in general. But the manner in which Africans entered American literature, the shapes and attributes given to Africans by white writers, can tell us much about the forms and shapes of whiteness in American literature. Not surprisingly, we find that many white writers, developing whiteness out of an aesthetic of blackness, created

stereotypes of whiteness that are as hard to part company with as are the stereotypes of blackness.

The amazing flexibility of such a formulaic aesthetic is evidenced in how quickly its language can enter a number of divergent narrative structures. We find this language in allegories, romances, mysteries, satires, and so on. This binary construct of blackness and whiteness has become sublimated and needs only vague reference for the readers to grasp the meanings and tensions. A short story such as Sherwood Anderson's "Paper Pills" does not primarily concern itself with the usual themes connected with black and white imagery such as evil, sin, and redemption, but instead it is a story about sweetness in human relationships. Yet, the entire narrative is cast in images of darkness and whiteness which carry the entire connotative value that moves the story to the resolution of the dark woman's death.

Although, there is nothing reprehensible about an aesthetic grounded in a binary opposition, in the case of literary study, the role of the critic goes beyond explicating and evaluating text; it includes also the job of contextualizing literary aesthetics. Understanding the literature means understanding its function as a creator of meaning via the images it employs, sees fit to employ, selects. Examining how these selections affect the possible shapes that an aesthetic may take, what boundaries these selections erect, and how this aesthetic then takes its place in (and acts upon) the larger context of history and the imagination of a culture, and thus, on the tools available to the critic, is also the investigative task of the critic. As the debates about the literary canon and about the process of how we evaluate texts continue, we may benefit from a close analysis of the way in which

American literature has used blackness to shape and define something as central as the idea of whiteness in America.

Literary criticism and theory in America is moving away from strictly Eurocentric critical approaches to theories that arise out of the particular experiences of the cultures whose literature we attempt to theorize and critique. In the African American literary academy, scholars such as Gates, Baker, Clark, Spillers, Stepto, and Appiah (to mention only a few) have done much to revise traditionally white theoretical and critical approaches to fit the cultural and experiential frame work of African American literature. But clearly their work has gone far beyond revision—it would be an embarrassing faux pas to assume that core tenets of white literary theory are as bland and broad as to offer no resistance to the radically different demands of African American literature. Baker has studied folk culture and the blues, as well as contributed largely to an important discussion of vernacular discourse; Gates has provided us with invaluable insight into African mythology and linguistic games particular to West African peoples. As the work of these scholars will be invaluable in charting an Africanist aesthetic in white literature in America, I will rely on them extensively.

This strong, emergent school of African American literary theory has even entered "mainstream" American literary criticism, and scholars are beginning to learn about the particular traditions of African American culture and their effect on American literature. Yet, in American departments of literature, we still teach courses with titles such as "Black Women Writers" and "Ethnic Writers in America;" we don't teach courses with titles such as "White Transcendentalists," or "Caucasian Expatriates," but clearly Emerson and Hemingway deliberatly define themselves as white

Americans. Since we appear to have remained stuck in this country in a color fixated stance, some close scrutiny of what it meant to be a *white* transcendentalist, or a *white* expatriate writing in the chaos of an emerging American world power might reveal some new and highly valuable insights into the emergence of an American literary aesthetic. A close analysis of the effects and influences of Africanism on American literature may prove very useful in revealing how white American writers have sought to express larger social crises of identity, resolve moral dilemmas, and delineate the boundaries that define their cultural and social roles and experiences; in short, such an analysis may help explain the particular characteristics of whiteness in American literature. Our task at hand, then, is to take stock of the creatively "parasitic" tendencies that any healthy artistic community relies on for its vibrancy and legitimacy, and to examine the intertextual play that grounds American literary aesthetics in a social order based on an economy of slavery.

Chapter 2:
The Horror at the Heart of Whiteness in Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*

"And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, *still* is sitting"

Much of 19th century American literature appears reflexive and self-searching; it seems often to return to its own textuality for self-affirmation. Intrinsically connected to this fascination with its own textuality is the predominant metaphor of blackness. But at the juncture of textuality and blackness is the fragile specter of whiteness. This whiteness, which sometimes occupies an overtly central position in American literature, is impenetrable, unknowable, and destructive. It is far more mysterious than the blackness that defines it. A necessary result of the dynamics of a metaphysical structure grounded in binary opposition is that an obsession with one will inadvertently call attention to its defining other. Fascination with blackness in American literature, then, will, by necessity, lead to an either implicit or overt exploration of whiteness. In much of 19th century American literature, this fascination with whiteness is of overt thematic importance. Edgar Allen Poe's own interest in blackness, which usually is of the morbid kind, finds a surprising development in the allegory *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, when a vertiginous fall into a vortex of whiteness concludes the story.

We don't know what to make of the mysterious ending of Poe's narrative because the only person who knows of the outcome is Dirk Peters, a

half-breed (whose primary function throughout the narrative appears to be to rescue the main character from one danger after another), and Peters has disappeared somewhere in Illinois. From the narrator, we learn that the main character, Arthur Gordon Pym, survived the encounter but that he later died a sudden and distressful death. Pym's own voice (the last few chapters) has been lost. Peters is the only survivor. But Peters' voice is also unavailable to us, and thus we, too, are left in the embrace of the same impenetrable whiteness that became Pym's end.

The *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* is a pastiche of voices and a narrative cast from continuously shifting points of view: the preface is written in the voice of Pym, telling us that the first part of the *Narrative* will be told by Poe, who as intrigued friend and "lately editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*" took upon himself the task to tell the story as fiction. Pym tells us that somewhere in the *Narrative*, he will resume the narrating function; the stylistic switch, he says, will be apparent (it is not). But Pym is prevented from telling the entire story. He dies (we learn this from a third narrator), and this anonymous narrator ends the story explaining to us that Poe declined the suggestion that he conclude the narrative/fictive story because he believed the story too fictitious!

Poe's *Narrative* is clearly an attempt to portray the multiplicity of voice as text, text as voice. A more well-known example of Poe's fascination with text is perhaps *The Purloined Letter*, which has received much attention from psychoanalytic critics as well as post-structuralists. But Poe's interest in issues of language and text clearly does not exist in a vacuum. Many of the works of his contemporary writers reveal a preoccupation with language and with the function of texts in the exploration and creation of America. The

19th century in American literature saw the theosophical and aesthetic fusion of Puritanism and transcendentalism; it also saw the violent upheaval of the emergent nation, and the restructuring of an economic system reliant on slavery and racism. That 19th century American writers approached and wrote about their nation in an aesthetic grounded in complex textual analyses is telling of this nation's linguistically based traditions, identity, and ideology. That their textual explorations often grew into tales and allegories dealing with the metaphysical concepts of blackness and whiteness both testifies to and implicitly undermines the fundamental presence of an aesthetic of binary opposites grounded in semiological idealism. This metaphysic of opposites inherent in the language and in the religions and ideology of early America merged with the economic/philosophical concept of race to form a dynamic tension characteristic of much of 19th century American literature. What has perhaps been overlooked in studies of blackness and of race in American 19th century writers is the connection between these linguistic constructs of race and the search for an American identity through language. A reading focused on the racial and textual preoccupations of writers such as Melville, Poe, and Hawthorne will reveal not only insights into the nature of language and its intimate connection to an American metaphysic of transcendence, but it will also reveal an implicit critique of an American identity grounded in such a metaphysic. At the heart of American identity is the word, these writers seem to say, and the word, around which so much else orbits, is blackness.

Edgar Allan Poe's strange narrative conclusion to *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (which is a narrative that doesn't conclude) is the only possible result of the extreme juxtaposition of blackness and whiteness in an

alien limitless land—an island of unknowable violence and wilderness, not unlike the uncontrollable expanses of the American continent. The island consists of entirely black elements and is inhabited by a savage black people who are haunted by the specter of whiteness. The natives refer to this apparition as "Tekeli-li," which Harry Levin, in his groundbreaking 1958 study of blackness in the works of Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville, reminds us echoes the Biblical "Mene, Tekel, Upharsin" translated by Daniel into "God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it. Thou art weighed in the balances, and found wanting. Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and the Persians." Along with Poe's own oracular inscription, "I have graven it within the hills, and my vengeance upon the dust within the rock," we are left with an image of a Southern land imperiled by its own division, by a vengeance inscribed in its own soil. The allegory becomes painfully transparent as the thinly satirical tone hits that familiar agonizing pitch characteristic of so much American literature.

But Poe's *Narrative* clearly satirizes the popular American genre, and since *The Narrative* relies on an allegorical aesthetic to make sense, the primary operating rhetorical tool is metaphor. Surprisingly, this combination of allegory, satire, and a heavy reliance on racial and violently fantastic metaphors reveals the artificial transparency of an American identity of presence reliant on racial ideology. Voiced with a satirical underpinning and in an allegorical form, the metaphoric images of sea voyages, the southward journey, the repeated threat of premature burial, and the consuming whiteness ironically reverse their idealized (internalized) status as metaphors, as if retracting themselves from internalized (transparent) meaning to the original metaphoric position of "standing for." By satirizing

the allegorical narrative, Poe (inadvertently?) brings attention to the pre-metaphoric nature of the elements from which his metaphors are constructed. Rather than upholding the sublimation of common metaphors such as black and white, which signal the binary opposition inherent in the racially determined social and economic system in which he is writing, he disrupts the sublimation by drawing attention to the pre-metaphoric value of these images. Rather than propounding the naturalization of the metaphors of race and color, Poe, in pursuit of mockery, estranges and exiles the metaphors of race and color from their most damaging position of naturalness, of transparent (pure) signification, in the literary imagination. Attempting to satirize the American genre of prophetic allegory, Poe falls prey to his own technique as he reverses the metaphors from their sign values to their preceding symbolic value. The metaphorical Black Tsalalians surrounded by expanses of whiteness are clearly out of place and breaking with normal function of blackness in American iconography. They do not represent the hidden sinful nature of humans, nor do they stand for the dark underside of Western society; they are too radically different to serve as the transparent other of whiteness. No doubt this exaggeration was Poe's intention, but in undermining the function of the transparent other of blackness, Poe, in fact, restores blackness to *itself*. We cannot help but feel the visceral presence of these distinctly separate beings. They are too distinctly real, as is Peters, and, ironically, they resist the sublimation into a metaphysical whiteness despite the apparent "victory" of whiteness that concludes the story. Nu-Nu, Pym's and Peters guide, dies, but he dies as discrete identity, whereas Pym comes to a terrible end in a confusion of unknowing—Pym is undone by his lack of distinction from the whiteness. Blackness, then, retains its contours,

whereas whiteness becomes its amorphous, pliable other—a non-presence, non-identity without difference.

Poe's reverse manipulation of metaphor delineates the possibility of metaphysics, making visible the metaphysic. What Poe, in effect, does by satirizing is to point to the marks left by a signification system upheld by invisible metaphors. Derrida explains in "White Mythology" how the desire to retain the metaphor as internalized idea makes it impossible for the philosopher to "examine the double turn which opened metaphor and dialectics, permitting to be called sense that which should be foreign to the senses" (*Margins* 228). Poe, in a stroke of artistic (autistic?) genius, reveals the marks of metaphor, positing the *Narrative* in the space just outside the metaphysical.

Yet, the allegory could not maintain its integrity did the metaphors not contain symbolic value. The *Narrative's* position does not cause it to be divested of metaphysical coherence. Instead, the irony of Poe's allegory is that while the metaphors function as symbolic values maintaining the symbolic whole, the satiric underpinning of the *Narrative* estranges the metaphors, causing them to point simultaneously to their pre-metaphoric value. The *Narrative* qua narrative mirrors the allegorical division signified in the text, still somehow pointing to its own binary opposition, mocking its own imaginary signifying value, even its own symbolic value. The *Narrative* points us back to its own pre-allegorical status as text, as distinct from the allegorical *Narrative*. The reason we cannot know Pym's fate, then, is that we are looking *beyond* the text for meaning. We insist on reading the *Narrative* as allegory. We insist on reading text as metaphor. We insist on

the metaphysic, and this despite Poe's obvious, stubborn insistence that we are not to read it as allegory!

For a critic to come upon this sort of tropic reversal while in the process of textual deconstruction may perhaps appear suspect—indeed, too convenient, too much perhaps the result of technique, or method. Since this paper is primarily concerned with method, its effects, how it affects as well as effects, we must ask: Can we know if the technique/method conjures the reversal, or if the text's own logic demands it? What are the implications of either supposition? In the economic transaction of interpretation, what is exchanged for what? Do the forms of exchange affect and/or effect the object under study (in this case whiteness)? What ripple effects in our local economy and the extended economical system in which our local economy is situated are created by the affects on the object under study by our method? A certain vigilance is required as we set out to chart the genealogy of whiteness in American literature, for the simple reason that we are as much in the process of creating whiteness as we are in the process of charting and interpreting it.

The question whether my method or the text brought out the reversal of metaphor in Poe's *Narrative* must be explored. Possible classical answers:

1. The text means as it is interpreted. This would transfer the primary moral burden of the interpretation of the text onto the reader. The reader would, in effect, become the writer. Still, many critics would still argue that one text can tolerate certain interpretations better than others, and even innovative methods of interpretation must respect the internal logic of the text. How we arrive at this internal logic then becomes of central concern as there appears to be much leeway for desire to govern

interpretation, just as there is much room for the author's intent and desire in the text, whether or not this desire is successfully communicated by the text. Interpretation in these terms becomes a battle of wills, or, inverted, a marriage of wills. Or perhaps a battle of contexts. The question still remains: how do we evaluate the reader's inscription on the text? If, in the pursuit of Africanist imagery in white literature, a critic reveals/constructs new meanings of whiteness, how do we contextualize and read that interpretive process? Is it our business to do so?

2. The text logically/aesthetically, requires (desires?) its own interpretation, in this case, a tropic reversal. This view of interpretation would invoke the ideal reader, the cognitive receptor of data generated by the text and projected on the reader. The author, likewise, once committed to the logic of one aesthetic would become locked into the pulsion of that aesthetic. Where does this leave criticism?

And yet, my reading above is flawed as much with the desire to create meaning as by the aesthetic pulsion of the existing text. According to my own reading, my own reading as a white critic ironically mirrors Poe's text in its destruction of the construct of binary opposition by calling attention to the ecstatic status of the metaphor: I delight in the estrangement of the metaphor, the dissemination and reversal of its naturalizing function, because it furnishes the rare opportunity to trace my own undoing/doing as a white intellectual.

However the kind of whiteness that emerges in my reading of Poe's narrative is a whiteness not completely idealized but streaked by the marks of its own making: a construct of whiteness, not the invisible "whiteness" we inhabit. The position the text leaves us in is the ecstatic position Derrida

speaks of when we are permitted to sense that which would be considered foreign to the senses: our own making in the ideal. The text, itself, tells us the result of such a permission.

The encounter with whiteness destroys not only the black native that Pym and Peters capture, but indirectly, we are led to believe, it also kills Pym. The sheer emptiness of whiteness consumes the life of the black native, whom they bring along as a guide to this southern heart of whiteness, but what it does to Pym is perhaps even more interesting. Pym, like the native, becomes consumed by the empty expanse of the impenetrable whiteness. But, unlike the native's death, Pym's death is prolonged by the narrative. Again, important to note is that the encounter Pym has with whiteness consumes his *identity*, not his existence, as in the case of the black man. Pym's death is, however, significantly preceded by the death of the black man.

Poe's text adheres to the tradition of Western philosophy and metaphysics in that it intimates that the juxtaposition of black and white is necessary to maintain the spacial delineation of whiteness. Its margins gone, the limitless expanses of whiteness render white identity meaningless, undermining the boundaries of white experience. And yet, this meaninglessness, this emptiness, and the frighteningly unrestrained freedom it brings is always the telos implied by a metaphysical identity derived through juxtaposition.

The southward movement in the *Narrative* signals Poe's affinity with the South, where he has his roots, as well as the site of Pym's ultimate encounter. Poe, who prided himself upon his Southern ancestry, believed blacks inferior and was an ardent upholder of slavery. His personal

insistence on the inferiority of blacks takes on interesting implications when the racially ambiguous Peters, in effect, becomes the hero, the gate keeper to the narrative's mystery—the other who occupies the key function of delineator of representation—and the only character whose integrity (discrete identity) remains intact.

Peters is clearly not cut out of the Western proto-typical hero mold. Poe describes him as a half white, half American Indian, a deformed character with a frightening unnatural build and an equally deformed head, "being immense in size, with an indentation on the crown (like that on the head of most negroes)" (Poe 249). Peters is a half-breed from the Black Hills, who by virtue of his mixed blood is physically "deformed" and, by connotation, Africanist. Poe appears to want deliberately to blur the racial lines. (We will see a similar blurring of racial lines in *Moby Dick* in Melville's characterization of Queequeg, as Carolyn Karcher has pointed out in her brilliant study of Melville's writings.) The most significant result of this racial blurring emerges in the quality of Peters' character, which incidentally is not entirely unlike Melville's savage. Morally, Peters is decidedly superior to the ferocious black cook from whom he saves Pym's friend Augustus; and we must assume, too, that he is superior to Pym, who continually relies on Peters for the safety of his life. Additionally, Peters is the only living being with the answer to the mystery Pym leaves us.

This is an interesting twist on the half-blood theme, since what we are left with at the end of the narrative is the revelation that Peters holds the answer to the mystery; only we cannot hear it. He is lost to us, and so we remain enshrouded in the mists of the impenetrable whiteness that separate us from him. Or could it be that we are not able to hear him because we are

enshrouded in whiteness—in white theory of whiteness? Disappearance, and the idea of the void remain the two predominant elements in the *Narrative*, simply and eloquently reflecting how the construct of whiteness renders white identity suicidal in nature. However, this was probably not Poe's intent.

Levin writes that Poe intended the *Narrative* to be a satire on allegorical narratives. But the irony comes to overtake the satire. The worst horrors seem to occur still within the boundaries of Western civilization in the form of cannibalism, violent mutiny and murder, the horror of the death-ship with the corpses of the entire crew and slaves rotting on deck, a white seagull picking at their putrid flesh. The savagery of the natives is no match for these earlier experiences. The fear that invests the closing passage then is less a concern with the natural fears of death and suffering; we've already had our fill of that, but it is more a concern with existential fears—the dissemination of the metaphysical. The terror of the loss of self is underscored by the narrative's conclusion: the veil of whiteness becomes the impenetrable barrier to the self. As readers we need Peters to tear the veil for us, but Poe removes Peters and in the act seems to say somehow that while the whiteness is unbearable, it is still better to die from it than become the dependent of a half-breed.

And yet, is this what Poe really intended; is it even what he says? The search for authorial intent is ultimately an act of conjecture, and all that we really have is the text itself in all its paradox, and the text seems to say something quite extraordinary. While Poe, through a series of narrative choices, seems to opt overtly for whiteness in the face of death, the text implicitly tells us that there is no choice. Should we search out and find

Peters, we, along with the idea of whiteness, (which presumably defines Poe's readership) would be consumed by the knowledge he would provide, *since it is the same knowledge* Pym has acquired. Thus, when we read the text carefully, we see that the knowledge is available in the text and that we, too, have no choice. Yet, interestingly, we leave the narrative still somehow looking off into the distance for a deformed character to emerge and tear the veil for us. The truth is the veil was always torn, and this is the horror of the *Narrative.* There was no need of a trip, no need of horrors on the seas, no need for frightening encounters with savages, nor premature burial—the tear in the veil is the lurking paranoia that the identity of whiteness is a hollow construct, an existential trap we can't get out of once we have entered it.

And, of course, we cannot exit the symbolic, but is there really no way for us to retrace our steps out of this metaphysical trap of meaningless, reductive whiteness? Critics have struggled with this problem, not explicitly, but certainly implicitly, as they attempt to resolve the illogical resolution of Poe's allegory. They have tried to make sense of Poe's conclusion in terms of psychoanalytic theory, theology, and even by explaining it away as the alcohol-induced hallucinations of a drunk. But the most pragmatic, contextual key to the mystery remains systematically left out by these theories: the actual manifestation of a textual/metaphysical binary construct of blackness and whiteness —a society sick to the heart. The fact that critics, who should be astute readers, choose not to see the contextual bearings on texts such as Poe's is disturbing and tantamount to psychological escapism, or perhaps complicity. The fact that they avoid seeing how the *Narrative* reverses the idealization process of metaphor in favor of an ultimately

destructive metaphysical value is testimony to a stubbornly quixotic tendency among literary critics.

D. H. Lawrence writes about Poe in his *Studies in Classic American Literature* that Poe's tales had to be written "because old things need to die and disintegrate, because the old white psyche has to be gradually broken down before anything else can come to pass." But Lawrence, interestingly, conflates the *white* psyche with the idea of the "universal" psyche of man, as he continues, "Man must be stripped even of himself. . . the human soul must suffer its own disintegration, consciously, if ever it is to survive." In conflating whiteness with universality, Lawrence misses the opportunity to learn something of the *nature* of this white psyche (*Studies* 70). This equation of whiteness with Man and the universal experience precludes all exploration of just *what* will replace the "white psyche," *what* "will come to pass," and *what* "is to survive"? These are fundamental questions at the heart of much American writing, and Lawrence, who calls attention to them, who comes so close to exploring them, proves himself incapable of even recognizing the logical necessity of addressing them once he has raised them.

But if Lawrence is blind to the undercurrent master race ideology of American texts as well as of his own British text, he is clearly aware of the connection between language and identity in Poe's works. Yet, even with this awareness, he proceeds as if 19th century American literature is universally representative of Man, and not, as it in fact likes to think of itself—as uniquely and distinctly American. Not surprisingly, Lawrence claims, focusing on Poe's story "Ligeia," that Poe's best works are his love stories, because they reveal "the human soul in its disruptive throes" (*Studies* 71). Lawrence, who uses "love" as his operative metaphor in most of his

explorations in psychology and metaphysics, does not break with this pattern in his analysis of Poe's texts. But we must read his analysis as just that, a textual analysis that uses love as a metaphorical device. Thus when Lawrence writes regarding the pursuit of romantic love that "the trouble about man is that he insists on being master of his own fate, and he insists on *oneness,"* we must also recognize that "love," in the capacity that Lawrence uses the concept, is part of that larger linguistic/metaphysical conception of mastery over experience/fate through the ideal of the word/oneness. Thus, Lawrence's comment that "love can be terribly obscene" refers in the case of Poe to the search for control and knowledge through language, as Lawrence later points out: "What [Poe] wants to do with Ligeia is to analyse her, till he knows all her component parts, till he has got her all, in his consciousness" (*Studies* 75). But, lamentably, Lawrence's astute reading fails where it is most needed. He is oblivious to the "Americanness" of Poe's story, to the insistence that Ligeia is the female Africanist other: she is tall, slender, regal, with raven-black hair, her eyes "far larger than the ordinary eyes of our *own* race. They were even fuller than the fullest of the gazelle eyes of the tribe of the valley of Nourjahad. The hue of the orbs was the most brilliant of black and, far over them, hung jetty lashes of great length" (Poe 62). "Ligeia" is, indeed, a study in man's need to control experience through language, but it is an American story, written by an American author, about American consciousness. Ligeia is the Africanist, exotic, mysterious and unknowable female other which is in this story quite non-threatening as "the beloved, the august, the beautiful, the entombed." She is the "ever-placid Ligeia" who is always just beyond linguistic reach/control: "yet not the more could I define that sentiment [of her eyes], or analyze, or even steadily view it. I recognized

it, let me repeat, sometimes in the survey of a rapidly growing vine—in the contemplation of a moth, a butterfly, a chrysalis, a stream of running water" (Poe, 62). Lawrence writes: "It is easy to see why each man kills the thing he loves. To know a living thing is to kill it" (Lawrence 72). But what does it mean when this knowledge is the cornerstone of American literary white male identity, and the thing [beloved] controlled and used to shape this identity is the literary female Africanist other? What does it mean that critics conflate the white psyche with the universal psyche of man? It is necessary that Ligeia both, as Lawrence puts it, "submits" to the narrator's wish to know her, and that she remains unknown, mysterious—she must both be controllable and elusive since she is the defining other of the white psyche, which must always be clearly identifiable as master while simultaneously beyond characterization, unique, distinctly discrete.

Language, then, is inherently a mask of stability, hiding the undercurrent flux of unknowable essence. Ligeia is the mask of language that Poe's narrator attempts to penetrate when he says that "there is no point, among the many incomprehensible anomalies of the science of mind, more thrillingly exciting than the fact—never, I believe, noticed in the schools—that in our endeavors to recall to memory something long forgotten, we often find ourselves upon the very verge of remembrance, without being able, in the end, to remember" (Poe 62). The idea that we can know essence through memory is defeated by the fact that recollection occurs through language. A consciousness that attempts to control its own identity by harnessing experience through analysis and recollection of pre-linguistic essence will always engage itself in a master-slave relationship with its defining other. Ligeia, not surprisingly, is therefore not able to, nor allowed

to die—and, indeed, she reemerges from death through the corpse of the narrator's second wife, who, importantly, is a blond, blue-eyed, "Saxon-Cornish blue-blood," to borrow Lawrence's terminology. Poe's concern with identity and with the disintegration of identity finds its center in the defining and illusory power of language. And race, as in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym,* is once again the operative deconstructive ingredient that initiates the disintegration of the white psyche. Clearly, Poe's own insights into the American psyche are not deliberate attempts to reveal the complex psychological dependency on a racial other. His personal views on blacks and slavery defy such a reading. But his art does reveal these complex undercurrents in both the American language and literature.

Levin, in his critical study of blackness in Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville, laments the unfortunate racist views Poe held but compliments him for hiding them: "If [Poe] shared those benighted sentiments of interracial hostility, which have made the black man so tragic a victim of our *history* (note distanciation, my emphasis), then he deserves some credit for having concealed them under the strata of his symbolism" (Levin 123). What positions do critics want to take today? It strikes me that Levin was writing in the midst of the civil rights era, and that what he had to say was widely read in academia. Do critics today want to continue hiding "under the strata of symbolism"? The answer is, of course, no, and the fact that we can neither continue to escape nor comply should bring us to serious questions of the role of criticism in a genealogical study of Africanism and whiteness in literature.

It is not as difficult for us to admit that although, indeed, Poe was a racist, he was also a brilliant artist and a strong literary influence on a number of future writers. But can we afford to continue to grant status to

artistic brilliance without a clear understanding of the larger implications and the socializing function such a grant implies? It seems we would have to re-investigate the entire process of evaluation with a commitment to scrutinizing the implications of the process itself. What would the interpretation of a work such as Poe's narrative have been like had we had a developed school of African American theory and criticism at the time of publication? (As we do today.) Are interpretation and criticism as fundamentally swayed by color as by the culture of academic institutions? Today America has excellent scholars (black and white) in African American criticism and theory, but what will be their role in re-evaluating the literature of America ? And what are the foundations for African American theory? What parallel, shared, or corresponding metaphysical constructs exist in white literary theory and African American literary theory? How will these metaphysical groundings affect our work? Questions such as these should guide us as we re-read and re-interpret texts—not least our own texts. And clearly, there is no room for [racially] separate camps in the case of evaluating race in literature. As painful and difficult as it may be at times, we must stop pretending that we live in separate worlds. This, at any rate, is what the literature, which has already joined us so intimately, seems to demand.

Chapter 3:
Hawthorne and His Thinly Veiled Tales

"My companion appeared to set great store upon some Egyptian darkness in a blackening jug."

I

If Hawthorne's wife had reason to wonder at this fixation on darkness, she could at least console herself with the fact that her husband's fascination with blackness never quite reached the morbidity of Poe's. In Hawthorne's aesthetic, black and white are symbols inextricably connected to sin and redemption. They are rarely connected explicitly to the relationship between blacks and whites, yet, by connotation and context, the images carry the symbolic value of social commentary. When Africanism occurs in a text in a manner as subtle as in Hawthorne's works, the discussion of authorial intent becomes important. Hawthorne's use of blackness as central metaphor gains its strength from the Puritan iconography. His images of blackness clearly fall within this category. However, Hawthorne wrote during a time of intense pre-civil war debates concerning the abolition of slavery, and the Puritan aesthetic of darkness had already appropriated blacks into its iconography. Hawthorne's aesthetic of darkness inherits, therefore, the historical and contextual legacy of an aesthetic of darkness inseparable from Africanist influence.

It is important to understand that the images come loaded with connotative values that inform the author's aesthetic. It is therefore quite possible to speak of an author's use of Africanism without crediting him or her for it. Authorial intent is seldom involved (although it is in the case of Melville), and it is, therefore, not inescapably a criterion when we analyze the

influences of an Africanist aesthetic in white 19th century literature. And, as we shall see, Hawthorne's aesthetic reveals convincingly and eloquently the American psyche as the site of a manichean drama between blackness and whiteness.

Hawthorne's allegorical tale "The Minister's Black Veil," turns on the familiar American literary symbol of the veil as a barrier between the self and the world; the veil, significantly, is black. In Hawthorne's aesthetic, the veil's blackness becomes as impenetrable as Poe's whiteness. Mr. Hooper's veil, however, unlike Pym's subconscious, vertiginous fall into whiteness, expresses the character's conscious decision to mark the impossibility of a spiritual communion between humans on this earth. Philosophically, Hawthorne's veil is the counterpart, the other of Poe's whiteness, in that it represents the lengths to which we must go in order to maintain a metaphysic of binary opposition. Rather than symbolizing the unbridgable gap that exists between the hearts of human beings, the veil becomes the barrier. Hawthorne's Mr. Hooper is adamant about his mission: to bring his congregation out of its torpidity and blindness, to show that all of us have "sad mysteries that we conceal from our nearest and dearest and would fain conceal from our own consciousness, even forgetting that the Omniscient can detect them" (Tales, 99).

But the veil ceases quickly to function as symbol and becomes instead that which it was meant to symbolize: the black veil soon becomes all the minister's congregation is able to see. It also becomes the minister's primary defining characteristic and, consequently, the only thing with which the minister himself cannot part. By wearing the symbol, which has undergone the transformation from symbolic value to transparent signification, he

becomes inscription. The veil, as symbolic inscription, defines his perception of self, his identity, as well as the way his congregation perceives him. In seeking to communicate a human characteristic via symbolic representation, he, himself, falls prey to the trap of text, the confusion and temptation of power and control over experience through linguistic manipulation.

Even Whitman, who otherwise exemplifies such assurance in man's ability to create himself, project himself, define himself, and transcend natural boundaries through the word, in a rare moment of doubt cowers at the thought that, perhaps, even he can never know anything but language itself. In the opening poem of the section titled "Leaves of Grass" in the 1860 edition" As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" he writes:

I too but signify at the utmost a little wash'd-up drift

. . . . . .

Aware now that amid all that blab whose echoes recoil upon me
have not once had the least idea who or what I am,
But that before all my arrogant poems the real Me stands yet
untouch'd, untold, altogether unreach'd
Withdrawn far, mocking me with mock-congratulatory sign and
bows,
With peals of distant ironical laughter at every word I have written,
Pointing in silence to these songs, and then to the sand beneath
I perceive I have not really understood any thing, not a single
object, and that no man ever can,
Nature here in sight of the sea taking advantage of me to dart
upon me and sting me,
Because I have dared to open my mouth to sing at all! (Whitman 133)

Whitman's startled recognition that he had never known Nature, only his own songs of nature, is genuine. And, of course, it must extend to all delusion of self-knowledge and self-creation outside of language, not least that American urge for self-definition. The line that begins "Pointing in silence . . ." bears an uncanny echo to Melville's *Moby Dick (MB)*, where Ishmael beckons us to look at Nantucket on the map, and quips with mock bravado, underscoring the linguistic irony, "see what a real corner of the world it is," and adding, " there is more sand there than you would use in twenty years as a substitute for blotting paper" (MB 157). Inscription, articulation, is blotted out by its own volition in both Whitman and Melville: first by relying on the transparent ability of text to "stand for," second by using its own power of signification to reveal the artificiality of that power. Of course, importantly, this neurotic split is textual, only possible because of the distanciation text creates. Likewise, the ideal of an extra-textual experience is reliant on its textual utterance. Nature, *the text says,* has no utterance (the enunciation of non-utterance), it points in silence (through text) to the artificiality of voice (text) as substitute for nature.

In Hawthorne's text, this realization emerges at the important merger of race and textuality, simultaneously underscoring the textuality of racial ideology, while also, implicitly, undermining all textual scaffolding of identity. Identity, Whitman *must* write in "To Think of Time," is the purpose of life: "It is not to diffuse you that you were born of your mother and / father, it is to identify you." Security is arrived at through identity, and identity, Whitman shows us, is arrived at through language. The poem continues with a long list of unavoidable metaphysical (textual) laws: the laws of time, of life, of evil and goodness, of personal characteristics, culminating in the

statement: "And I have dreamed that the purpose and essence of the known / life, the transient / Is to form and decide identity for the unknown life, the permanent" ("To Think of Time").

Whitman's philosophical conclusion reveals the utilitarian approach to his art, but also, I think, to the art of many of his contemporaries. His idea opens the debate to just *what* needs to be defined and *what* is to be used as the defining other to arrive at this identity. In Whitman's own poetry, the concrete images are meant to reveal something of the ineffable, transient experience, which he calls "the permanent." But, clearly, they are meant to define what it is to be American. "The permanent" is America. It is an America that cannot be grasped but only intimated, only hinted at through its concrete manifestations: its people, nature, music, voices. Clearly, this spiritual/mystical vision of America has its roots in the early history of the pilgrims; but in the transcendental movement, the vision has grown from referring solely to the "chosen people" to an idea of an entire chosen land of inexplicable spiritual promise and providence. Whitman's poetry establishes this idea so strongly that, although he purports to celebrate humans, he ends up sublimating them to the larger idea of America. Ironically, Whitman, who chastised the English romantics for subordinating humans to nature, for littering their verse with unnatural literary metaphors, falls prey, himself, to the trap of textual objectification of his "American people" in favor of the idea of America.

I have dwelled on Whitman's poetry not because he relies on Africanist imagery (he seldom does), but because he, perhaps more than any other American writer set out literally to *write* America. His poetry would never have been possible had there not already been a tradition of textual self-

definition in America. And the importance of a tradition of self-definition through text is what makes other American writers' use of Africanist imagery so fatal to American identity, which both our writers and critics have shown us, time and time again, is equal to the idea of whiteness. Poe and Hawthorne both come to their existential crisis in the characteristic juncture in American literature of identity, text, and race, Hawthorne, perhaps, more subtly, but with equal detriment to white identity. By invoking Africanist images through text in the search for an American self, both authors simultaneously call attention to the textuality and artificiality of the construct of this self and the inherent reliance on the formless, pliable African other. This complex identity construct crumbles, as it must, when these writers (as they also must) turn their attention to the construct itself in a desire to know it, to control it.

What occurs in Hawthorne's tale is, in effect, the remarkable aesthetic inversion of the development in Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. Poe's character meets with the destruction of his identity through immersion into sameness—whiteness. In Hawthorne's tale, on the other hand, the main character discovers his identity, and the prison thereof, by blackening himself and immersing himself in his metaphysical other, that which, in effect, ironically both defines him and separates him and marks him off from himself. But because the American symbol of blackness contains a dual reference to death and sin as well as to blacks as the white other, the minister's immersion in blackness performs two simultaneous functions: a) it brings out and embodies the disembodied metaphysical and sublimated ideas of evil and sin as integral parts of the human psyche, and b) it calls attention to and identifies itself with the margins that define the self. Because

American metaphysical iconography has granted blackness the status of both center and margin, whiteness, as a symbol in this iconography, becomes the beleaguered consciousness that must either suppress its subconscious folds or allow itself to be turned inside out.

The self-searching acts of both characters, Pym and Mr. Hooper, effect a rupture of the metaphysical bind between the two polar opposites of black and white, a rupture of which the result is simultaneous discovery and destruction of the self (the self as a construct of this metaphysic). We could, perhaps, read these two allegories then as tacit warnings, lest we maintain the sublimation of binary opposition. It is interesting, however, that it is in the searching desire for insight into self-identity, unity of self, that the opposition breaks down. The implications of this fact are as philosophically daunting as they are aesthetically compelling.

In light of these implications, it is important, then, that the veil is black; since, as mentioned, blackness enjoys the conflated status of center and margin in American metaphysical iconography. By developing the plot around the theme of the blackening of a white man, the text is able to explore existential issues concerning the identity of the subject that are specific to American society. It is also important to recognize that this process of blackening produces insight *because* it connotes blackness as a metaphor for African Americans. The connotation anchors the inward search for self-identity in a specific historical, social, and psychological context—a context much more tangible and psychologically compelling than the ghosts of Puritanism. It provides a tangible grounding for the self lost in the vortex of metaphysical intangibility. Its functions are threefold: as a temporalizing delineator arresting the self in time; as a spatial delineator localizing the

embodiment of self; and as the arena where the event of self can occur. But the self that emerges in Hawthorne's allegorical tale is not the symbolic unified whole of Jungian psychology, nor is it the psychoanalytic appearance of the Freudian subconscious. Instead the text's own tortured voice reflects an, at times, intense psychological agony not unlike that of Greek tragedy, one that is created by Hawthorne's contemporary human tragedy of slavery:

> 'Have patience with me, Elizabeth!' cried he passionately. 'Do not desert me though this veil must be between us here on earth. Be mine, and hereafter there shall be no veil—it is not for eternity!. . . But even amid his grief, Mr. Hooper smiled to think that only a material emblem had separated him from happiness, though the horrors which shadowed forth, must be drawn darkly between the fondest lovers (*Tales* 103).

The minister's blackening makes this an image of a failed symbolic inter-racial marriage. (Melville will, of course, develop the theme of inter-racial marriage to perfection in *Moby Dick*.) But also because of the dual role of blackness as a metaphysical symbol, the image represents the failed integration of self. This last failure is, of course, a mark of high tragedy. It is an aesthetic made possible in Hawthorne's writing, as in Melville's and Poe's, by the complicated merger of a Puritan iconography and an Africanist influence. It is important to note that this failure of integration is a necessity in an aesthetic of self-generation that relies on the distinct other. Puritan blackness is always symbolic and a part of the whole. Africanist blackness, however, always threatens to subvert the symbol and to emerge in flesh and blood—because it is flesh and blood. When Hawthorne writes that "only a material emblem had separated them" his words carry immense ironic weight. They also carry the internal threat of the revolt of that idealized (emblem) corpus (material) relegated to mere symbolic function.

Although Hawthorne remains ambiguous in his tale as to the references of his symbols, the juxtaposition of black and white, the archetypal symbols of funerals and marriages, and the allegorical stock characters such as tragic young maidens, old hoary men, and young playful boys all comprise the landscape of the metaphysical psyche. In this landscape, the central revelation and insight turns on the trope of the blackening of a white man.

> What but the mystery which it obscurely typifies, has made this piece of crape so awful? When the friend shows his inmost heart to his friend; the lover to his best-loved; when man doesnot vainly shrink from the eye of his Creator, loathsomely treasuring up the secret of his sin; then deem me a monster, for the symbol beneath which I have lived, and die! I look around me, and, lo! on every visage a Back Veil (*Tales* 106-7).

It is the meaning inscribed onto blackness that makes it dreadful, not its own nature, Hawthorne says. This meaning, in the sense of making something *mean* (perhaps also in the sense of making it represent the standard, common, the transparent norm) is also the inscription of the viewer's own psyche onto the veil. The words of Hawthorne's character reveal the nature of language as it functions in our imagination when he says that the black veil "obscurely typifies" the mystery. The metaphor obscures its own genesis in the projection of the self. But Hawthorne, like Poe, deliberately brings attention to the process of obscuring the idealization process of metaphor, of the metaphorization of the self in the other. In doing so, both writers reveal the construction of a powerful metaphysical structure with social and psychological implications. And they do this using the metaphors that figure at the center of one of America's greatest tragedies: racism.

At the end of the tale, Hawthorne marvelously conflates the image of the black veil with the idea of life as a veil. On the minister's death bed, a colleague, minister Westbury, asks: "'The moment of your release is at hand.

Are you ready for the lifting of the veil, that shuts in time from eternity?'"(*Tales* 106). Here the metaphor of the veil undergoes its innate tropic reversal. Westbury's questions mark the need for distinguishing himself and the congregation from Hooper. Hooper's departure into eternity defines the rest of the congregation's proper status still within the boundaries of time. Hooper will no longer be "measurable," distinguishable, once the veil is lifted. But at this moment of lifting, the veil would no longer be the mark of the wearer, but would, instead, attach itself to those who see nothing but a black veil, the radical other which defines identity. The veil of racism, of course, just like the veil of identity, has always imprisoned all who wear it in its deathlike grip. Therefore, Hooper insists on taking the veil (the mark of difference) with him into the grave, and this is, indeed, the morbid image that Hawthorne leaves us with: "Mr. Hooper's face is dust; but awful is still the thought, that it mouldered beneath the Black Veil!" (*Tales* 107). Awful because it could only mean one thing: that he had long ago ceased to live, as had all the others who lived by the veil. But the veil had, of course, always existed in this tropic reversal, as is the nature of anything whose function is to signify, and it was, therefore, no more attached to Hooper than it was to those who insisted on seeing only black veils. Hawthorne leaves us then with an image of the faces (identities) of his community mouldering under the veil of racism, which here comes to symbolize the artificiality of symbolic identity.

In this crossroads of identity, the failure of symbolic definition, and the use of Africanist images, Hawthorne's aesthetic draws attention to the danger of self-articulation by means of a reliance on a radical other. The futility and failure of such a self-definition is made evident because of the use of Africanist images, which are impossible to keep in a sublimated status—

since they represent in essence the most pressing threat to white identity. Thus, Hawthorne's reliance on Africanist imagery reflects a symbolic whiteness that differs only somewhat from Poe's in the sense that it begins at a different end to accomplish the same goal. Hawthorne's whiteness is psychologically entangled with theology, with ethos, and morality. As such it is concerned intimately with the social fabric of human communities. Poe's whiteness, as it emerges in the *Narrative*, is a supernatural, quixotic fantasy that transgresses the boundaries of society. We could say that Hawthorne is concerned with how the idea of whiteness undermines the community through the individual, whereas Poe is concerned more directly with how the idea of whiteness entombs the individual psyche as the center of community.

Reading the Africanist influence in Hawthorne reveals an unsettling (soliciting) image of whiteness. This unsettling of whiteness, interestingly, serves to focus attention on whiteness at the expense of the Africanist influence. This may be the necessary result of an analysis that seeks to understand the influence of Africanist imagery on whiteness. Does this relegate the Africanist influence to the mere status of tool, or catalyst? I think not. In any discussion of either whiteness or blackness, that which is not addressed or does not occupy the center becomes marvelously visible in its absence. This is the irrepressible nature of this binary opposition.

II

The symbolic veil, which Hawthorne made such good use of in "The Minister's Black Veil," occurs again in the same collection of tales in a more

revealing function in the story "A Virtuoso's Collection." In this story, the item that captures the visitor's fancy appears, at first, not to be part of the exhibit:

> In the part of the hall which we had now reached I observed a curtain that descended from the ceiling to the floor in voluminous folds, of a depth, richness, and magnificence which I had never seen equaled. It was not to be doubted that this splendid though dark and solemn veil concealed a portion of the museum even richer in wonder than that through which I had already passed; but, on my attempting to grasp the edge of the curtain and draw it aside, it proved to be an illusive picture (*The Complete Short Stories* 446).

The virtuoso explains to the visitor that he need not be disturbed, but that the veil is the *trompe-l' oeil* painted by Parrhasius, which deluded Zeuxis in the classical anecdote. And Levin writes about the passage: "Nor is he (the visitor) [disturbed], since he is used to being confined within four narrow walls, and since he is himself the consummate master of two-dimensional art" (Levin 66). Melville, Levin adds in conclusion, would have "banged his fists against the wall in Titanic rage, and clamored for a sight of what might lie beyond the curtain." But, ironically, that is where Levin (also, apparently, a jaded master of two-dimensional art) ends his discussion of this text. We, in turn, however, are left to ponder the significance of a literary character that is not disturbed by this impressive, dark, illusive veil, as well as the significance of a literary critic whose curiosity is so little piqued by the narrator's off-handed explanation that the visitor is not surprised *since he is himself* the master of two-dimensional art. Hawthorne, it seems, has done his share in revealing the function of blackness in his own aesthetic; Levin, however, ignorant to his own reading, does his best to restore both blackness and his own reading of it to their shadowy, invisible, metaphysical realm.

And yet, Hawthorne does make explicit his own advice that it is in the literary imagination of the artist that we should seek for knowledge about the artist:

> And as for egotism, a person, who has been burrowing, to his utmost ability, into the depths of our common nature, for the purposes of psychological romance,--and who pursues his researches in that dusky region, as he needs must, as well by the tact of sympathy as by the light of observation--will smile at incurring such an imputation in virtue of a little preliminary talk about his external habits, his abode, his casual associates, and other matters entirely upon the surface. These things hide the man, instead of displaying him. You must make quite another kind of inquest, and look through the whole range of his fictitious characters, good and evil, in order to detect any of his essential traits (Levin 70). .

Levin recognizes the necessity of reading the author through his aesthetic, but forgets somehow to read the aesthetic itself. Just as he forgets to read the aesthetic of his own reading. As a result, he makes the mistake of interpreting the quote as saying simply that a writer's aesthetic reflects solely on that individual writer's introspection: "If we say of him--as we do more readily of other novelists--that he creates a world of his own, it is *his* own that we should emphasize rather than *a world* "(Levin 70). There is, however, no support for this assumption in the quote itself. In fact, Hawthorne refers to the psychological romance as a "burrowing into the depths of our *common* nature" (Levin 70 my emphasis). What Hawthorne seems to imply is that we should look at the artist's aesthetic choices if we want to understand his essential traits, but in the same breath, this ideal of individuality is conflated with the ideal notion of the artist as representing a common human nature.

Somewhere in the textual in-between-space of Hawthorne's and Levin's suggestions lies an urgent hint to us that if we scrutinize the individual

author, who projects what he *perceives* to be common humanity into his aesthetic, this scrutiny may reveal the process by which the notion of a common humanity is created, how this process predetermines the forms it takes, and the extent to which the availability of material contributes to the construction of such an aesthetic. If we do this, we will be able to discuss our literature as art, that is as artifice teaching us about the construct and function of our own perception of ourselves. We will also be able to discuss the effects of such an aesthetic on our perception: the way it has contributed to a creation of a metaphysic of transcendence and enabled us, as Toni Morrison so effectively points out, to move in American literature with the economy of stereotypes, by means of formulaic metaphors, by a subliminal universalization of the values of a metaphysically condensed symbolic system, and perhaps most dangerously, how we have become blind to our own literature's social relevance as a result of the dehistoricizing of allegory.

But Hawthorne's texts, just like Poe's, will not allow us to plod so carelessly along (although critics such as Levin would have it be so). At least they will not if we read them carefully. And it is in this careful kind of reading that we must remain critical of our own readings. The dilemma of the critic who understands that she creates the text as she reads it is ironic at best, a confounding trap at worst. It is easy to become transfixed by the sense of responsibility that accompanies criticism. I know no other way out of this than to assume the responsibility of acknowledging the potentially distorting value my method has on the texts under analysis and hope that continued research and discussion will bring a deeper understanding of both the literature and my role as a critic.

In the case of Hawthorne, I have already tried to show how Africanism has entered his aesthetic in the form of a connotative force that significantly alters and re-creates the psychology and idea of whiteness. I have also, implicitly, argued that my own reading of "The Minister's Black Veil" would not have been possible were it not for the Africanist influence in the text.

The fact that few critics (if any) have shared my reading of the text poses some interesting questions regarding the interpretive process—a process we were able to observe in Levin's handling of the same text. I would argue that my reading of Hawthorne's tale is supported by the text itself because the text cannot resist its own inscription of race, simply because it relies so extensively on the central metaphor of blackness, and in American literature blackness and race have come to be fused concepts connoting one another. I have already discussed the dual function (margin and center) of the metaphor of blackness in my analysis of the text, but I would like to caution those critics who maintain, simplistically, that the texts themselves teach us how to read them. If texts in fact deconstructed themselves in this manner, the imprint of the critic would be negligible. But I do not think that we can sit back in comfort assured that our literature will miraculously reveal itself to us, nor that our imprints are, in fact, negligible, especially not when the texts contain the potential for revealing insights that may prove disruptive to our deep-rooted sense of self. I have, perhaps unfairly, pointed out Harry Levin's subtle but serious failings to address key issues in both Poe's and Hawthorne's texts as they relate to race and white identity and the critical voice in America, but I have done so not to crucify Levin (he could not be more incidental), but in order to illustrate the machinery of criticism, its function, and its results.

Chapter 4:
Melville and the Rebellious Nature of Text

I

Melville's focus on racial issues has attracted much critical attention, but literary critics have not been unanimous in recognizing race as an important aesthetic influence in Melville's works. Yet, the presence of race in Melville's writings has clearly affected his aesthetic, and his works deal much more deliberately with racial tensions in America than the works of many of his contemporary writers. Melville's texts outline a complex metaphysic in which race inhabits the function of pervasive catalyst in everyday human relations. It also figures predominantly as an important metaphor in the ideology of spiritual transcendence. But Melville's texts are most effective when they are read as insightful deliberations (with considerable implications) on the function of language in the creation of racial ideology.

When Melville published *Benito Cereno* (BC) in 1855, a cool reception awaited the novel. But this was perhaps less the result of the story's poignant criticism of American blindness to the insidious logic of slavery than it was simply disappointment that he hadn't written another *Typee* or *Omoo*. The story's brilliant irony was for the most part lost on his readers, leaving them, instead, with a confused sense of discomfort. It is easy to see why Melville's story would have unsettled its readership. Images such as slaves polishing hatchets on deck, the giant prince, Atufal, dubiously chained, the much too self-assured personal servant, Babo, holding a knife to his master's throat, and unchained African children brutally disciplining a white boy were

fuel for the American readers' fear of slave rebellions. And, clearly, too many things go wrong in this narrative, the implications of their occurrence overshadowing the image of Babo's decapitated head staked on a pole in the city plaza. The American captain's failure to recognize the obvious dangers of his situation is intimately linked to the function of language as ideological scaffolding, and, of course, it invests the story with an ominous warning of violence to come.

It is crucial to understand, as Houston A. Baker has pointed out, that the slaves were not simply an economic factor in the structuring of America, but that they were also spiritual cargo. The early Americans were fueled by a sense of exclusivity in their struggle for a new world in which the accumulation of economic wealth was ideologically fused with spiritual maturation, both of which were intrinsic parts of the preordained role of Americans as God's chosen people. The slaves were indispensable to the construction of the new world for economic reasons, but they became also necessarily and inextricably entangled in the spiritual visions that were at the heart of the myth of America. Consequently, it became necessary to view Africans brought to this country for economic gains as, in fact, reluctant pilgrims. Thus, invested in these Africans who were brought to America in chains was the entire language, teleology, and promise of the New World.

In light of this understanding of slavery as intimately wedded to this spiritual/economic American identity, we must acknowledge that aside from the plot structure of *Benito Cereno* the real genius of Melville's story lies in this astute understanding of the ideology and discourse of slavery and racism as issues inseparable from the larger issues concerning an American identity and language itself. Four years earlier, in 1855, Melville built his

masterpiece, *Moby Dick*, around the same hyper awareness of the ironic duplicity that is the nature of language, opening the novel with the unforgettable words: "*Call* me Ishmael." But whereas in *Moby Dick* Melville deals with language and its connection to ideology much more directly, in *Benito Cereno* the entire plot is a trap, revealing the function of language at the heart of the illogical rationale of racism by luring the readers to insight through participation in this illogic.

As readers of *Benito Cereno,* we must ignore the obvious in order to grant the narrative coherence. But our acceptance of Amasa Delano's obtuse logic also tests to what lengths we will go to preserve myth. In his recent book, *To Wake the Nations*, Eric Sunquist draws the symbolic parallels between the novel's triad, Delano—Cereno—Babo, and the historical triad, (Anglo-Saxon) North-America—(Roman-European) South-America—West-Africa, revealing how Amasa Delano's /America's whole *identity* depends on the preservation of myth, while Delano's/America's *physical survival* depends on the dispelling of that same myth. In revealing the lengths to which we go to grant ideology coherence, Melville grounds our simultaneous aversion to and need for multivocality in the violent economy of the sign .

Melville's writings center around the practical manifestations of an ideology that requires these ironic supplements in order to preserve univocality, returning again and again to the incommensurability of the ideal and the real. Significantly, Melville does not restrict his discussion to the practical issues that result from this discrepancy between ideal and real. Instead, by focusing perhaps even more deliberately on the function of language as the locus of this discrepancy, he reveals the logocentric origins of America and the necessary perpetuation of this logocentrism for preservation

of American ideology. Melville's deliberate focus on language, ironically, both echoes and explains Poe's *Narrative*. Both writers make apparent how the dangers of an American identity so wholly reliant on a linguistically constructed metaphysic emerge where the vectors of blackness and whiteness intersect.

The shadow dance on board the *San Dominick* exploits the latent tensions of actual slave revolt. Sundquist, in his chapter on Melville, accurately observes how the narrative gains its force through this "act of ritual control." But he then goes on to state that this ritual control is "regulating and containing acts of *near* revolt in which the ceremonial may at any moment give way to the actual, in which roles threaten to be reversed, and the figurative revolt contained in the liminal realm of Delano's consciousness threatens to be forced into the realm of the literal" (Sundquist 144, my emphasis). Sundquist's reading overlooks Melville's extraordinary accomplishment of making revolt happen through text. The text is not an ominous sign of the possibility of revolt; it is not a ceremonial enactment of possible scenarios. The text itself is revolt as it traps the reader, any reader caught in the ideology of slavery, the economy of American ideology and semiological idealism, and forces the reader, through the internal logic of the text, to conclude the necessary outcome: the erasure of American identity. The text accomplishes this without the aid of an "actual" reversal of roles because the "actual" identity of America is, at heart, a linguistic construct. It is of utmost significance that this revolt is anchored in language and that, as such, it is already always occurring in the text and in the mind of any American reader. Sundquist's own confusion is apparent when he refers to the figurative revolt in the realm of Delano's consciousness as dependent on

and presupposing the actual symbolic (note the illogical extent to which language must stretch here) "regulating and containing acts of near revolt." His reading is blind to the fact that these "regulating and controlling acts of near revolt" depend for their entire significance and logical weight on the figurative realm of Delano's (the reader's) consciousness. The absurdity of Sundquist's concluding statement that "the figurative realm of Delano's consciousness threatens to be forced into the realm of the *literal* " is testimony to the pervasive power of transparency in an identity reliant on linguistic constructs.

Melville capitalizes on these crises perpetuated by transparency by calling attention to their source in the rift between apparent actual reality and linguistic metaphor. The principle of American identity, he recognizes, is firmly embedded in self-proclaiming language, and since slavery, by necessity, had become an integral part of American identity, criticism of slavery as an institution implied that a revision of American identity could only take place through its epistemology. Many of Melville's writings are, therefore, attempts at revealing the construction of American ideology through a deconstruction of its epistemology. In *Moby Dick,* Melville establishes early on the artificiality of the entire story through the narrator's regularly interfering comments on the text itself. In chapter 12, "Biographical" (written life), Melville writes of Queequeg's native island, Kokovoko, "it is not down in any map, true places never are" (MB 150), and later in the chapter "Nantucket" he writes, "Nantucket! Take out your map and look at it. See what a real corner of the world it occupies" (MB 157). Seven pages apart, the two comments are subtle but poignant reminders that text is not reality, or in more contemporary terminology, that we are not to

confuse the signifier with the signified. (Or that reality as we know it is textual?) To emphasize his point, Melville describes with an hilariously detailed linguistic irony the chasm between the sign (the map as well as the text itself, which contains the map) and the literal (actual?) physicality of Nantucket (which of course we cannot see on the map): "See what a real corner of the world it occupies; how it stands there, away off shore, more lonely than the Eddystone lighthouse." Troping deliberately on his own text, he continues: "Look at it—a mere hillock, and elbow of sand; all beach, without a background." The entire description is in fact a language game that tropes on itself. There is no real place for us to see, just words on the page telling us what Nantucket is in metaphors such as "Eddystone lighthouse," "elbow of sand," "corner of the world" (MB 157). In a clever allusion to inscription, he points to the logocentrism of our imagination: "There is more sand there than you would use in twenty years as a substitute for blotting paper" (MB 157). The overlapping images have the effect of blurring the line between the written Nantucket and the literal (real?) one. Does the [imaginary] Nantucket inscribed in our minds blot out the [real]?

After having claimed Nantucket's position alone in the sea "all beach, without a background," a background which the text, quite correctly, lacks at this point (and without which it, technically (as techne, [token, sign]), cannot function), Melville then proceeds to provide with deft linguistic insight all the "concrete" background we could ever want:

> Some gamesome wight will tell you that they have to plant weeds there, they don't grow naturally; that they import Canada thistles; that they have to send beyond seas for a spile to stop a leak in an oil cask; that pieces of wood in Nantucket are carried about like bits of the true cross in Rome; that people there plant toadstools before their houses to get under the shade in the summer time (MB 157-8).

These concrete literary images gradually draw attention to their own artificiality as we move from slightly believable images of planted weeds, to less and less believable images of holy wood chips and toadstools grown for shade. The artificiality of our [imaginary] Nantucket is cleverly paralleled with the "true cross in Rome." Melville manages to suspend all claims on truth, anchoring the entire narrative in language as the creator of reality. This move enables him to make statements of political and social import claiming, accurately, that his text is not an allegory, but that language, itself, is allegory.

This play on/with play in language is Melville's forte. *Benito Cereno* is successful because it shows how linguistic constructs are both powerful enough to blind us to physical reality and, in fact, have the power to construct our reality. In *Moby Dick*, Melville's narrator initiates this discussion of language by beginning the novel with a statement referring to himself in "Etymology" as the commentator of a "Sub-Sub librarian:" "So fare thee well, poor devil of a Sub-Sub, whose commentator I am" (MB 77). Melville's narrator is literally (in its truest (literally?) sense of the word?) three steps removed from the original "librarian," but clearly his point is that language exists in us in indefinite layers, its origins elusive, always moving away from us, and that all we are left with are representations of representations.

> Therefore you must not, in every case at least, take the higgledy-piggledy whale statements, however authentic, in these extracts, for veritable gospel cetology . . . these extracts are solely valuable or entertaining, as affording a glancing bird's eye view of what has been promiscuously said, thought, fancied, and sung of Leviathan, by many nations and generations, including our own (MB 77).

Melville's premise is that the narrative to follow is no more fact than language itself can be factual ("authentic"). But he manages also to say that

whales are to some extent inaccessible to us outside of the generativity of language. This is how the novel begins, and this is how we must read it throughout, with suspicious awareness of its apparent transparency, at every turn, suspending language itself.

The next important reminder of this philosophical dilemma occurs in the chapter entitled "The Chapel." Ishmael enters the chapel, the destination of his "errand," and sees everyone staring at marble tablets with inscriptions of fishermen lost at sea. The narrator says he "does not pretend to quote," but the text then goes on to quote, in detail, exactly (we automatically assume) the type of fonts and layout of the tablets. The form itself has subsumed content, and Melville seems to say that we cannot even approximate language without reiterating (quoting) form. When Ishmael enters the chapel, he notices that the only one not reading the plates and who actually looks up to see him enter is Queequeg (whose entire body is covered with inscription, who *is* text), because Queequeg can't read. Melville echoes his own theme from *Benito Cereno* here showing us how language obscures vision while simultaneously engendering vision. Language is catalyst, is the object on which the catalyst moves, and is also the engenderer of both the object and the catalyst. It exists because it iterates itself.

This central theme of language in Melville's works is, clearly, important if we want to understand his focus on race. I have already discussed the effects of *Benito Cereno* on Melville's contemporary audience. Along with the social and political implications of his allegory, the fact is that Melville's astute criticism of racial ideology in America identifies language at the heart of this ideology. His theory of language emerges in bits and pieces but builds to an instability, a rift and a multivocality at the center.

II

In the ethical choice between the ideal and the real, Melville decidedly comes down on the side of the real. But it is a pragmatism infused with ethical implications of idealism. In coming down on the side of the real, he gives us, in books such as *Moby Dick*, and *Billy Budd*, humanity as the chronometer to which we must be true. It is less important whether Melville came to this understanding as a result of his reactions against slavery and racism. What is more important is that in his writings he worked out so many of his struggles with America, and with humanity in general, through stories and scenarios involving issues of slavery and racism.

Melville's writings grew out of an America where the institution of slavery had festered into a potentially fatal wound, and he was himself a committed abolitionist. Building his aesthetic on the foundations in American literature laid by the Puritans and early colonists, Melville found an already existing literary aesthetic centered on darkness was available to his own literary imagination. This legacy of literary darkness directly influenced his own aesthetic, but it also functioned as a framework within which he could take great liberty--incorporating a critique of democracy and the American view of humanity--using the real social issues at the time: the failure of democracy and the lack of concern for human beings. It is important to note that Melville's literary success was at its height with books like *Typee* and *Omoo*, books which met his audience's fascination with the exotic and adventurous. These books were escapist literature to his contemporary audience. The savages encountered were not persons, but exotic creatures of the American imagination. It was perhaps not incidental that when Melville, in books such as *Benito Cereno* and *Moby Dick,* insisted

on characterizing blacks and native Americans as persons intimately related to every American, to the core of American identity, his success declined drastically.

Too fantastic and inscrutable, the epic incantations in *Moby Dick* did not suit the adventure-hungry readership. But the novel's seriousness clearly carries a warning to America "that an apocalyptic shipwreck over slavery would engulf all Americans--guilty or innocent, white or black, southern or northern" (Karcher 89). Karcher's 1980 critical study of Melville's treatment of race issues functions to highlight an interesting avoidance of matters concerning race and slavery in other critical studies of Melville's works. Again, Harry Levin's classic study of blackness in Melville, Poe, and Hawthorne will serve as an example. Levin treats the first encounter between Queequeg and Ishmael as follows:

> The wanderer, in his loneliness, may seek companionship; and, to his own surprise, he may find such another self as the black man now sleeping at Ishmael's side. But his wanderlust has an ulterior objective, which is nothing less than to come to grips with the supernatural, as it has been obscurely apprehended in Ishmael's dream" (Levin 169).

With Queequeg's arm hugging him, Ishmael wakes up from a dream of an incident in his childhood when he had tried to crawl up the chimney. He was punished by having to go to bed, and in the dead of night he awoke, sensing in the darkness the hand of a supernatural presence placed in his. Ishmael's recollection (via a dream) of this supernatural experience immediately precedes the scene of Ishmael and Queequeg waking up in the landlord's conjugal bed. Yet, here Levin proceeds as if the text is not an artificial construction adhering to certain aesthetic principles but, instead, life itself and concludes that the scene is simply an expression of Ishmael's desire to

come to grips with a childhood experience. Levin does not question why this desire should have entered the central character's mind at the same time as he encounters another main character, Queequeg, or why Melville would have placed this scene here. We do not know whether Levin's obtuse reading is a result of looking too intently in the wrong place, or a deliberate decision not to acknowledge Melville's rhetorical construction of psychological foreshadowing and layering of images (a white orphan punished for attempting to blacken himself, a supernatural encounter, and an interracial "marriage") to prepare us for the image of Queequeg's and Ishmael's intertwined lives.

The misreading of such a key passage reflects a critical position more than it does an embarrassing oversight. Interestingly, Levin's own critical focus on blackness in the literary imagination prevents him from reading the racial influence in a scene such as this one. His ability to build an entire discussion around blackness in pre-civil war literature without acknowledging the historical material crowding in on these writers is an astounding feat, and the reception and continued position of his text as a landmark study of American literature is testimony to the power of his own intellectual, political, and historical context as a scholar.

This context emerges early in *The Power of Blackness*. In the introductory chapter entitled "The American Nightmare," Levin quotes W. H. Auden speaking about American literature: "'Most American novels are parables; their settings, even when they pretend to be realistic, symbolic settings for a timeless and unlocated (because internal) psychomachia.'" Levin, then goes on to comment that

> [Auden's] is a good example of critical paradox, in contradicting the usual emphases on local color and timely relevance. But

> Mr. Auden is not being overemphatic when he directs us back to the center of consciousness, and revives the early Christian debate between the soul and the body (Levin 17).

As readers, we must stop here to wonder at a critical move that so completely sidesteps (in theory as well as in practice) the issue that criticism of literature often fails to live up to its name. More often that not, literary criticism is indeed a paradoxical concept. Of what does the critical function of Levin's own analysis consist? Note the glaring lack of attention to "local color and timely relevance" in Levin's own response—attention to which would, indeed, have identified him as a critic.

Levin's critical approach illustrates how the machinery of criticism often works to obscure its own making, and in doing so, obscures the literary constructs. If the function of criticism is to interpret, can we agree with J. Hillis Miller when he writes in his essay "Theory at the Present Time"that interpretation is also exemplification? Miller suggests that "each good example of reading is an exemplification of other examples, according to a strange logic of synecdoche in a situation like literary study in which there exists no possibility of totalization or the establishment, once and for all, of an all-encompassing general theory" (*Future of Literary Theory* 107).

Miller's insight into how criticism works leads to a number of considerations: 1) What happens when the previous examples are not "good"? 2) To what extent are critics accountable for the traces of previous readings in their work? 3) Don't the repeated examples (variations on a theme), in fact, effect a totalizing general theory? 4) Is it not the subtlety of the way in which repeated examples of similar readings effect this unity that is most damaging? It would appear that if interpretation is exemplification of previous readings, then criticism needs to uncover *how* this exemplification

occurs. This, of course, involves the difficult task of deconstructing one's own text as well as those it relies on.

Levin's reading of Auden is, of course, to use Miller's term, an exemplification of Auden's text. But his reading (or example) is presented as a completely separate, objective response to Auden's ideas. Levin is clearly not interested in Auden's text, or he would have noted that Auden's *text*, in affirming American literature as primarily allegorical, is itself an example of this idea. Auden's text does not exemplify realism in criticism but an affirmation of text as metaphysical allegory. His insistence that most American novels are parables, "even when they pretend to be realistic" (Is this what Auden is doing here?), and that they are "symbolic settings for a timeless and unlocated (because internal) psychomachia" serves to illustrate just how this is accomplished in text. By treating text as the thing it represents, or in de Man's words "to confuse the materiality of the signifier with the materiality of what it signifies," Auden, true to his thesis, abandons the attempt at realism in exchange for metaphysics. Levin, in turn, continues (much in the fashion Miller has outlined) the counter-critical process by exemplifying Auden's text with an embellishment disguised as difference: "*But* Mr. Auden is not being overemphatic when he directs us back to the center of consciousness" (My emphasis). The rhetorical function of "But" creates the illusion of a separate, new reading. What the clause introduces, however, is not a contrast to Auden's ideas, nor to his rhetorical strategy. Rather, Levin's critical response, example, and variation grounds us more firmly in the totalizing unity of a general metaphysic.

We must also ask ourselves whose center of consciousness Levin is concerned with here. What does he accomplish with the use of this Jamesian

term? Would it be fair, in this case, to say that this is an idiosyncratic imposition on text? Similarly, we must ask what it means to refer to this movement as "*back* to the center of consciousness." Is this not, first, a chronological impossibility and, second, a hierarchical ordering of a consciousness based in metaphysics of time over a consciousness based in locality? These metaphysical assumptions indicate clearly the intellectual and political context of Levin's discussion.

What we end up with as a result of a hierarchical ordering such as this one, which rests solely on the notion of an evasive yet somehow omnipresent original consciousness (whose particular name here, Center of Consciousness, originates in the literary establishment) is a sort of folding over of previous statements, an iteration of literary constructs, and it amounts to nothing short of a license to forgo the very critical inquiry that may reveal some of what went into the making of the metaphysic we honor. We must also marvel at the double distortion at work here. First we have Auden, who assures us that although American novels pretend to be realistic (i.e. claiming some innate access to truth through representation of particular conditions), their true concerns are with timeless and unlocated psychomachia (i.e. access to truth through transcendence of particular experience). Then we get Levin's explication, which takes us right to the heart of American myth-making: this timelessness and unlocatability is due to the fact that these are parables of the "internal" (read infernal?) debate. And so it goes in a circular argument whose firm stranglehold on so much of American literary criticism cannot but cause one to wonder at this apparently tremendous need for myth at the heart of American letters.

Perhaps we would do well to reread Melville's *Benito Cereno* for a reminder of just how pervasive and damaging this adherence to myth can be. The closing of Melville's novel seems to parallel Levin's blindness to the propounding effect of multiple linguistic exemplification. Melville, of course, uses this multiple exemplification through referral to the "real" deposition in order to reveal the opposite effect of the intention of such multiple exemplification. Instead of validating the fictive story with the "real" deposition that follows, the hierarchical ordering of fictive story and real deposition functions to undermine both. Because we have discovered the illogical response of Amasa Delano to the situation aboard the *San Dominick*, we are able to read the same illogic in the deposition, which is supposedly and solely factual, given under oath: "that these statements are made to show the court that from the beginning to the end of the revolt, it was impossible for the deponent and his men [and Delano] to act otherwise than they did" (BC 100). Benito Cereno points out to Delano that the desperate jump into the boat was designed to save Delano, to which Delano responds: "'True, true,' cried Captain Delano, starting, 'you saved my life, Don Benito, more than I your; saved it, too, against my knowledge and will'"(BC 103). Melville accomplishes with this short interchange a clever move that reveals the nature of the American's epistemology: his language and ideology will kill him, and rather than part with these, he will be killed. He can only be saved against his knowledge and will, but the closing deposition, as well as Levin's return to the same internal myth, testifies to a stubborn unwillingness to recognize the danger of such insistence.

As in the case of Auden and Levin, it soon becomes clear how insistent reference and deference to the concept of the "internal debate" clouds the

ongoing process of the creation of blackness. In analyzing (objectifying) the process of othering by invoking the ancient "internal" debate, the act of othering in criticism and literature is hidden and simultaneously associated with the mythic status of innate nature. The result of this referral to innate nature also clouds any understanding of the construction of whiteness. As in Levin, as in Sundquist, even, whiteness is the transparent shadow essence of a linguistic presence. But Melville's text clearly tell us something much more concretely about whiteness as he slowly and deliberately reveals the contours of the metaphysic of blackness in America.

Chapter 5:
Critical Approaches to Africanism in American Literature

Any reading of Africanist influences in American literature should raise questions regarding cultural and political ideology. Most discussions that do focus on the link between race and ideological concerns usually fall into the category of studies in minority literature and are considered to belong only to the territory of critics and theoreticians committed to minority and ethnic literature. This may perhaps explain the general apparent blindness to similar concerns in works of white writers and critics of white literature. However, as my readings have set out to demonstrate, ethnicity is well and alive in white American literature, as well as in criticism of this literature. This ethnicity is fundamental both in the self-definition process and in the unraveling of the identity derived from a merger of textuality and ethnicity. White identity in American letters is by necessity an ethnic construct and must be treated as such. Additionally, it is a construct that belongs to the aesthetic of a construct of artificial appearance (text), not transcendent essence. These simple considerations are still somehow the bogie men of American criticism, and the manner in which we discuss them ought to be the central concern.

In both *Theories of Africans* and *Blank Darkness,* Christopher Miller speaks at length of the curious "other" position of Africa, Africans, and things African in Western discourse. His studies of Africanism in French colonial literature help us understand how a similar process occurred in American literature. "Africa," he points out, "is the Other's other, the Orient's orient"

(*Blank Darkness* 16). Africa is placed in a curious third position, which Miller describes as a strange position of vacillating between non-entity and identity by alliance. To the Arabs, Africa originally referred to the immediate region around Carthage, but with the expansion of colonialism, it came to stand for an entire continent, much of which was unknown territory. As such, Africa came to signify an idea of "the other" more than an actual specific place, people, or event (travel in, trade with, or communication with). Africa became an idea identified by its negative value of being neither the West nor the Orient; but, nonetheless, an idea as event in the extended imagination and construction of the colonial self—Europe.

The construction in colonial discourse of an identity and idea as event through negative value, an other with no voice, enabled white ethnologists and writers to inscribe their imaginations into the African identity and, consequently, to have their own imaginations inscribed with this African identity in the most fantastic ways, inventing men with tails and a people whose phrenology predisposed them to lives governed by pure desire. Miller uses the 19th century French ethnologist Joseph de Gobineau as an example of how white ethnologists, in fact, literally (in both its literal meanings), *found themselves* in Africa via the consequences of such imagination:

> But to say when barbarism began is a question that is beyond the forces of science. By its very nature it is negative, because it remains without action. It vegetates unperceived, and its existence can be noticed only on the day when *a force of opposite nature* presents itself and barbarism is breached" (Gobineau qtd. in *Blank Darkness* 19, my emphasis).

In proving Africa a nullity until perceived by Western eyes, Gobineau unwittingly posits the opposite scenario as equally true, the necessary result of the logic of a Western metaphysical identity of presence: Europe does not

exist, or exists only in a state of vegetation, without its other. "Barbarism," in Gobineau's text, is revealed as simply the lack of distinction, as that which precedes identity. And, significantly, Africa, unlike the Orient, remained curiously and deliberately unknown to Europe for a long time.

Even as late as in the mid-nineteenth century, the New American Cyclopaedia read:

> Its name is a mystery . . . . Its size unknown. . . . Its population is an unsolved problem: geographers have set it down at various figures, of which the lowest is 60,000,000, the highest 110,000,000. Its configuration is a matter of guess-work . . with lakes believed to be of large extent, with rivers which are sanguinely expected to prove navigable. . . . But it will be *borne in mind* that much of this presumed configuration rests upon conjecture. In regard to the ethnology and languages of Africa, we know hardly any thing . . . . None of the native African languages are thoroughly understood by foreigners (Qtd. in *Blank Darkness* 19-20,my emphasis).

Despite available information about Africa, the American encyclopedist felt he must preserve the "mystery" of Africa. Thus, the imperative phrase "it will be borne in mind" is a wonderful twist of linguistic irony. Africa cannot exist outside the Western mind but *must* be born through the conjecture of the Western mind. A dual warning, perhaps: much has to be kept as "unknown," and what ever is "made known" must be a product of the Western imagination.

Poe's short story "Ligeia," discussed in the first chapter of this essay, relies on the same type of deliberate obscuring of that which is used to define the white experience. In the story, it is imperative that the Africanist other remain mysterious and ultimately ungraspable: "And thus how frequently, in my intense scrutiny of Ligeia's eyes, have I felt approaching the full knowledge of their expression—felt it approaching—yet not quite be mine—

and so at length entirely depart!" (Poe 62). The narrator must turn to the natural phenomena of "growing vines," "a moth," "a butterfly," "a chrysalis," "a stream of running water," for the closest resemblance to Ligeia's expression. Ligeia, as pure object, is beyond language and, as such, the pliable, inanimate other that language is able to control through the transparency of non-language. The function of Ligeia in Poe's story is to appear as the blackness of non-utterance, to be the radical opposite of thought and consciousness, because the further removed she is from that which is known through linguistic expression, the greater the extent and implication of the narrator's linguistic control and, thus, ironically his presence. Linguistic control over experience establishes the extent of both the narrator's power and presence. This focus on linguistic control reveals language as the producer of self-knowledge—through the Africanist other—and as such, of an identity of presence. The surprising end product of Poe's story is that white (male by default, Poe shows us) identity is an artificial construct reliant on an Africanist presence so real it must be sublimated and distanced for white identity to emerge in control.

This need for obscurity, for the unutterable experience, is deeply rooted in American literature. The Puritan aesthetic of darkness preserved the myth of uncontrollable forces of darkness because this uncontrollable blackness was an important ingredient and driving force in early American society and economy. This same transcendent, inexpressible experience is also one of the core characteristics of Whitman's poetry. But the interesting dilemma that occurs in so much of 19th century literature is created when Africanist images represent this ineffable transcendent other. Yet, this use of Africanist imagery posits whiteness and the presence and experience of white

Americans as also somehow strangely intangible, impalpable. There is something in the very structure of language that demands this; that is, if we are to be logical about the whole thing.

But, of course, this is not the kind of logic Gobineau was concerned with when he set out to discover by means of obscurity the European identity. Yet, his text functions to establish the symbolic context for a European identity, as well as for an American identity. And as Miller points out (and as Poe also showed us in "Ligeia"), the appearance of the white race, throwing light upon the dark race, must inevitably destroy what it knows, the knowledge it has fabricated. "Darkness can be known only by shedding light on it; that is, it cannot be 'known' as such" (*Blank Darkness* 19). And in staying true to the logical paradigm of Gobineau's text, we conclude the reverse must also prove true: whiteness is similarly "destroyed" or distorted by its revelation (creation?) through blackness. And, indeed, is this not exactly what writers such as Melville, Poe, and Hawthorne accomplish? Because their writing focuses so intently on its own textuality, they, in fact, end up drawing attention to the very artificiality of the construction of whiteness.

If we stay for a moment longer in Africa to draw some parallels to the American literary experience, we will have to note that the Western epistemological invention of Africa as idea and as linguistic event moved her irrevocably into the purely semiotic. Thus incorporated, Africa proper remained inaccessible to the European imagination. Simultaneously, Europe's distanciation and coming to awareness of itself through the semiotic other (not the corporeal other) ends necessarily in the rupture of the self. In colonial literature, the self (West) is, as a result, disembodied (dismembered

?) by its own articulation, and, thus, in the compulsive quest for Voice, we can perhaps only expect to get Kurtz's "the horror, the horror." This rupture commits the self to an endless desire for articulation of self through the other as object; and as a result, it renders itself object, as the victim of linguistic revenge. But something not unlike this happens in American literature as well.

The use of Africanist imagery in writers such as Poe negates the possibility of reality; that is, of any actual communication with blacks outside the realm of the symbolic. This is why Melville's Amasa Delano cannot see what is actually happening aboard the *San Dominick*. But as Melville points out, this is also why Delano nearly dies. The European reliance on the distanciation of Africa produced the murky and uncertain identity of colonial Europe, but never is Europe's entire identity at stake simply by virtue of the physical distance to the colonies. American writers' use of the Africanist other to define the white American identity produced a whiteness constantly besieged by a reality that could not so easily be kept at a distance.

Miller's study of French and Colonial literature is valuable for understanding the dynamic created by the use of Africanism in American literature. The creation and distanciation of the other through language has brought about a self dismembered, a self always struggling to hold itself together but feeling simultaneously the fluidity of its center reflect the enforced transformations of the other. Any change in the way white writers in America have perceived and used blackness in their works has inescapably changed its often unspoken opposite—whiteness. In Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville, we see clearly how whiteness as a metaphysical and literary construct could not escape its own trap of objectification. By exploring the

ways in which whiteness has been constructed through blackness in American literature, we may actually begin to understand more of the implications of such an aesthetic tension.

Although we may recognize the Africanist influence in American literature, interpreting this influence proves problematic for a whole host of reasons. First, there are many ways to look at this influence. We could attempt to transport ourselves back to the moment of the creation of these works, perform archeological digs into the minds, cultures, and societies of writers and audiences. This approach would also have to involve a critical evaluation of the selection process, methodology, and language used for this kind of study. If this method proves unsatisfactory, we could summon more textually based approaches—the same considerations would apply to this kind of study. Finally, we could listen to the ancestors of the voices of those "others" that were used as tools in the making of the white self—we could engage in communication across racial lines today to discuss our methodology, the effects of our language, and the desires that fuel our work in order to understand our literature as the product of a continuously speaking context. How we decide to look at this "othering" of African Americans, how we look at the use of images and tensions derived from and inspired by a social order based on othering may determine how close we get to seeing what it means to be American according to this literature.

If there is such a thing as an American mind, an American consciousness, then how influential has American literature been in creating and/or modifying this mind or consciousness? This, many would say, is a chicken-or-egg question. Nonetheless, it is a question (albeit frustrating) that is too important and too intriguing to students of literature to be let go at

that. In *The Interpretation of Otherness*, Giles Gunn tries to unravel this tangle by looking at the relationship between mind, culture, and society, and how literature fits into this structure:

> If mind is to be defined as that peculiar set of dispositions which empowers individuals to seek some control over their experience by producing symbolic versions of it, culture may be viewed as that continually expanding web of symbolic versions which human beings use hermetically to achieve this control (*Othereness* 138).

Social structure, in turn, he says, is the organization and patterned exchange of actions, informed by this culture. We could think of a kind of dialectic exchange characterizing the relationship between culture and society. Culture and society are always "talking" to each other to connect theory with praxis, to make meaning of experience, erect structures and form patterns for us to mold our lives. But as much as we rely on the manufacture of structure to function, we tend to forget the artificiality of our structure. We forget that this structure is built from values and beliefs, and so this ideology becomes at once the mortar and the stone, the steeple and the church bell, the hierarchy of mores and the confirmation of inclusion through which we affirm our sense of self. We forget, in Ortega y Gasset's words, that "creencias (beliefs) are not ideas which we have, but ideas which we are . . . [not ideas] *with* which we encounter ourselves . . . [but ideas] *in* which we encounter ourselves, [ideas] which seem to be present before we think" (*Otherness* 138).

Seen in this context, we can say that writers, who have used a steady flow of these *creencias* or beliefs to guide their art, have, indeed, influenced and modified the American mind as far as the larger structure would allow them. Morrison's call for attention to the Africanist influence in white literature in America has in common with Gunn the idea of a "consciousness

exchange" between art and society. In *Playing in the Dark*, she identifies some of the Africanist influences in canonical writers such as Hemingway, Twain, Poe, and Cather. Her interest is in understanding the creative minds of these white authors:

> What Africanism became for, and how it functioned in, the literary imagination is of paramount interest because it may be possible to discover, through a close look at literary 'blackness,' the nature—even the cause—of literary 'whiteness' (Playing 9).

The question then is of what benefit this inquiry would be. Morrison declares herself less motivated by self-interest than by a sincere desire to understand American literature. This comment in itself reveals the possibility that someone would benefit from the discovery and analysis of Africanism in American literature. But who would benefit? How and why would they benefit? Morrison's idea that specific beneficiaries may emerge out of the wake of this kind of work should serve as a warning. If we take her words to mean that all of us may gain some understanding we didn't already have of American literature and American society, then her idea is not disturbing. If, however, she is referring to a favoring of one kind of literature, theory, influence, reading, ideology over another, then we have a problem—not because there is something incompatible with literary scholarship and power; these are inseparable. But, if we enter the debate with ideas and theories that are prescriptive, be they socially, structurally, or aesthetically prescriptive—without the willingness to trace the construction of these theories—we may get stuck in rigid positions of theoretical and political posturing, which in themselves will obscure rather than illumine the effects of Africanism.

If we can prove that white authors have relied extensively on an African presence in this country in the making of the fictional American self, then what do we do with this discovery? How do we talk about and make sense of it? Into what, or whose, theoretical structure do we slip this information? Will our choice of language matter when we talk about this aesthetic intertextuality? What will be the implications of focusing on one theoretical discourse over another when we apply them to our analysis of the Africanist influences in American literature? We can either say that these questions go beyond the scope of literature, or we can say that literature includes the larger issues of the reciprocal function of art as a formative, ideological instrument in society, in self-definition, and in our language. And perhaps we would do well once again to remember Ortega y Gasset's idea of *creencias* as forming us, and, as a result, also our discourse, our tools of analysis, the parameters of our critical ability. Is it possible for critics to shed their beliefs, or at least to bracket them, and really hear the voice of Africanism in white American literature? And what will this double voice tell us about American literature and about ourselves?

In his essay, "There Is No More Beautiful Way," Houston A. Baker, Jr. writes that "a theory is an explanation," (*Afro-American Lit.* 135). And, yes, theory does explain. But, again, it is also in the nature of theory to structure specific cognitive frameworks, frameworks which tend to have uncanny ways of molding the material (text) to fit the particular theory we use. Morrison's warning takes on a new and deepened meaning when we realize the connections between theory and interpretation:

> Criticism as a form of knowledge is capable of robbing literature not only of its own implicit and explicit ideology but of its ideas as well; it can dismiss the difficult,

> arduous work writers do to make an art that becomes and remains part of and significant within a human landscape (*Playing* 9).

Thus it becomes clear why theorists such as Baker, Williams, and Gates argue for an African American theory for readings of black literature. In his essay "Criticism in the Jungle," Henry Louis Gates, Jr. discusses this very question of applicability of contemporary literary theory to African, Caribbean, and African-American literary traditions. Problems with definitions, insensitive readings, lack of contextuality, and simply language itself plague the applications of Western theory to minority literatures:

> Theory, like words in a poem, does not 'translate' in a one-to-one relationship of reference. Indeed, I have found that, in the 'application' of a mode of reading to black texts, the critic, by definition, transforms the theory and, I might add, transforms received readings of the text into something different, a construct neither exactly like its antecedents nor entirely new (*Black Literature* 4).

If Gates is right that the particular literature and theory must inevitably undergo a reciprocal change in the application process, then we can also see a problem with the whole notion of theorizing intertextual influences in what has traditionally been viewed as two separate bodies of literature—with black literature as the marginalized literature and white American literature as the central, canonical one—although the two are very closely, perhaps even, if we are to believe Morrison, organically linked. The specific concern with applying Western theory to an African literary influence deals with the problem of applying a white discourse to a black textual influence and the inevitable transformations of that textual influence that will result from this reading. The question then must be whose theory we should use to analyze this influence. Gates' words underscore the specific theoretical problem we should be concerned with:

> The challenge of black literary criticism is to derive principles of literary criticism from the black tradition itself, as defined in the idiom of critical theory but also in the idiom which constitutes the 'language of blackness,' the signifyin(g) difference which makes the black tradition our very own (*Black Literature* 8).

In another essay, however, deliberating on discourse in black literary scholarship, Gates chooses to quote Derrida: "It is the challenge of the black tradition to critique this relation of indenture, an indenture that obtains for our writers and for our critics. We must master, as *even* [my italics] Jacques Derrida understands, how 'to speak the other's language without renouncing our own" (*Afro-American Lit.* 25). And, on another occasion, this time in his essay, "Canon-Formation and the Afro-American Tradition, "drawing parallels between Anthony Appiah's concern for the application of European theory to African literature and the African-American critics' concern for the application of Western theory to African-American literature, Gates says, "the concern for the Third World critic should properly be to understand the ideological subtext which any critical theory reflects and embodies, and the relation which this subtext bears to the production of meaning" (*Afro-American Lit.* 27). Although Gates is clearly open to influences from theorists from other cultures, he does put his finger on my own concern, and what must be the concern of any sincere critic, that our language is already pointing us in a certain direction. How do we "escape" the specific ideology and value system our discourses carry with them, and is this indeed what we want to strive for?

To explore these issues, a good point of departure is current African American literary theory. This is the logical place to start for a number of reasons: first, because African Americanists have articulated a desire to build their own theoretical discourse so as to break free of the ideologies that

attach to Western theoretical movements, secondly, because white voices and imaginations are already "coloring" the black images in American literature. The perspectives of African American theorists may illuminate the construct of white critical ideologies. If white critics listen carefully to African American theorists, they may be able to prevent the temptation of objectifying the influence of Africanism. This last problem may be the most difficult one to escape. It is difficult to refrain from objectifying something one is studying, yet, in this case, it is crucial that this does not happen without our awareness of it, lest we become trapped in a vicious cycle of othering. Thus, since theory is a systematic use of language that attempts to explain, and ends up identifying in the process, and since the belief of many African American theorists is that the language of African American literary theory must be anchored in the African American text, culture, and language, we must in the end be concerned with the difficulties that arise from language structures and theories grounded in culturally defined ideologies, ideologies which do rely on a firm definition of self and other.

As we look at white texts influenced by Africanism, we will find that the stereotypes and the misreadings of African Americans are indivisible from the sub-presence of the black aesthetic ideals, the signifyin(g) of black English. Gary Saul Morson's idea of the palimpsestic characteristic of the double-voiced word, where the "uppermost inscription is a commentary on the one beneath it, which the reader can know only by reading through the commentary that obscures in the very process of evaluating" could perhaps also apply to Africanism in white literature (Morson qtd. in *The Signifying Monkey* 50). One could think of white writers' use of the white construct of Africanism as an unwitting invitation to those stereotypes, to that influence

to take on a life of its own, which it does. In fact, in Melville's *Benito Cereno* this is exactly what happens, is it not? These stereotypes are prone to turning on, and actually signifying on their masters in the very literature of their masters! This is a complicated but necessarily consequential result of othering, of assuming the other as a figure, as a stereotype in order to define and articulate the self. What emerges then in some American literature is an aesthetic principle, based in a textuality of othering—one that relies, if not explicitly, then implicitly, on the necessary possibility of the reversal of the textual subject/object relationship.

It is perhaps important to clarify a few things at this point. First, my language has obscured and muddled the terms "Signification" and "double-voice" in order to demonstrate something that occurs in certain instances of Africanism in white literature. The Africanist influence, of course, never performs anything, and signifyin(g) is by nature a conscious act, not a passive effect. Furthermore, in the instances of Africanist influences in white literature, it is rare that anybody actually "turns around" to signify on the master language in the sense of an individual character taking control of a narrative situation. Second, it is crucial to recognize that this control is not taken, but that it is given. Inherent in the process of objectification is the relinquishing of control. This is not because othering as a phenomenon is unique in its dependency on its object, but because the kind of stereotypical othering is uniquely reliant on a violent, non-reciprocal dependency, which a non-stereotyping intertextuality is not. For example, a non-stereotyping intertextuality, such as the resonance of structure, theme, images, and tropes in works by the same author, same school of authors, or genre of writers relies on an inter-dependency of aesthetic principles. There is also explicit

intertextuality, such as the kind found in Joyce's *Ulysses*, a work whose greatness depends in large parts on its aesthetic intertextuality. In the instance of Joyce, we are acutely aware of the function and effect of intertextuality. In much American literature, however, we may often be quite unaware of levels of intertextuality such as Africanism. We do not recognize the Africanist influence in the thwarted images, the absences, the tensions, the utter paranoia, the inexplicably sublime—in the places where deeply formative questions are worked through in so much of American literature—because we have not really read that intertextuality yet. If we remain in this American proverbial darkness, insistent on reading only the stereotypes, only the constructs of white Americans instead of the real presences beneath the figures, we may soon come to recognize that we may have been playing, along with those same American authors and critics, the unfortunate role of the Lion in this "jungle."

So where does this leave us? Clearly, we need not go far to find eager and competent critics of American literature, but it also seems that perhaps these critics will need a new kind of criticism in order to explore Africanism in American literature. Aside from the concern Morrison sparked by her suggestion that someone may, in fact, benefit from the discovery that Africanism has been an important influence in American literature, another concern is that this material will pose a special challenge to American critics. Since this material is both the embodiment and the product of racism, it will require a kind of vision that is both clear and honest. It strikes me that looking at these Africanist influences, we are digging around in the very loci of vulnerability in American literature. There is something painful about taking it apart, revealing it, and perhaps there is a right spirit and a wrong

spirit for this work. I am reminded of Sherley Anne Williams' words on white critics of black literature:

> Their validity as critics of Black literature has still to be established in the same way that we are establishing ours —through the acuteness of our insights and the clarity of our perceptions. With only the rarest exceptions, white critics have proved time and again that their perceptions are neither deep enough nor precise enough to give us the insights we need into our literature and our experience (Williams 234).

As a frightening example of ignorance, Williams explains, in *Give Birth to Brightness,* how white critics misread and created the "so-called zombie of the vodun cults," which has since been reduced to a cocktail! I'm sure we could find many more frightening examples of the results of this kind of embarrassing ignorance, an ignorance which in this case contributed to the othering of African Americans. But precisely for the purpose of avoiding these kinds of mistakes, we need to listen very carefully and to read the literature equally carefully.

I think that Williams' concern about white critics working with black literature must also extend to white critics reading and interpreting Africanism in white literature. How we will solve these problems is still not clear to me, but I am reminded of Houston Baker's discussion on the same issue. Baker argues in "There Is No More Beautiful Way" for the need for an autobiographically based theory of African American literature. He writes, "the general goal is, I believe, a family identity—a black, national script of empowerment"(*Afro-America Lit.* 143). To the question of whether or not this autobiographical stance precludes non-African American critics, Baker answers:

> The answer is painfully No. Painful because the incumbency for the non-Afro-American critic is to finger the jagged grains of a brutal experience in which—if he or she is white

> —he or she is brutally implicated. 'Autobiographical,' in my proposal, means a personal negotiation of metalevels that foregrounds nuances and resonances of a different story. The white autobiographer who honestly engages his or her own autobiographical implication in a brutal past is as likely to provide such nuances as an Afro-American theorist (*Afro-American Lit.* 144).

Baker's words bring to me the awareness that my own work on this subject will not yield much without an "autobiographical" investment. But then, I suppose I knew that when I first started my tentative research in this area. What I had only vaguely realized, however, but which my choice of primary texts has alos proven to me, was that I would have to assume the double nature of the brutality he speaks of—that of shame as well as injury. But like Baker, I believe it is possible for non-African American critics to work with these issues, and, perhaps unlike Baker, I believe it is also *necessary*, since, as the literature seems to implicate, we have hinged our identity to a large extent on an aesthetic of race. And through careful "autobiographical" readings perhaps non-African American critics and writers, too, can eventually turn American literature over to the next generation in a gesture of invitation, just as Amiri Baraka did. But this time it will be with the difference of a clear-eyed and mutual awareness of the pain that has gone into our making:

> I wanted to know my mother when she sat
> looking sad across campus in the late 20's
> into the future of the soul, there were black angels
> straining above her head, carrying life from our ancestors
> and knowledge, and the strong nigger feeling. She sat
> (in that photo in the yearbook I showed Vashti) getting into
> new blues, from the old ones, the trips and passions

showered on her by her own. Hypnotizing me, from so far
ago, from that vantage of knowledge passed on to her passed on
to me and all the other black people of our time.
When I die, the consciousness I carry I will to
black people. May they pick me apart and leave the
bitter bullshit rotten white parts
alone

("leroy," Amiri Baraka, *Black Magic*: Poetry 1961-1967)

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